destroy all COMICS

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THIS ISSUE : INTERVIEWS WITH
CHRIS OLIVEROS AND BEN KATCHOR

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Dylan Horrocks is the creator of the comic book *Pickle*,
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Sirk Productions drew this issues cover without the aid of photo references.
They also conducted the interview with Mr. Katchor.
They also made the comic Storeyville which is available for $3.00 payable to
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He's a good person.

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and most recently in *Last Gasp Comics & Stories*.

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He's currently finishing up a ten page story for
the next issue of *Top Shelf* and working on a graphic novel.

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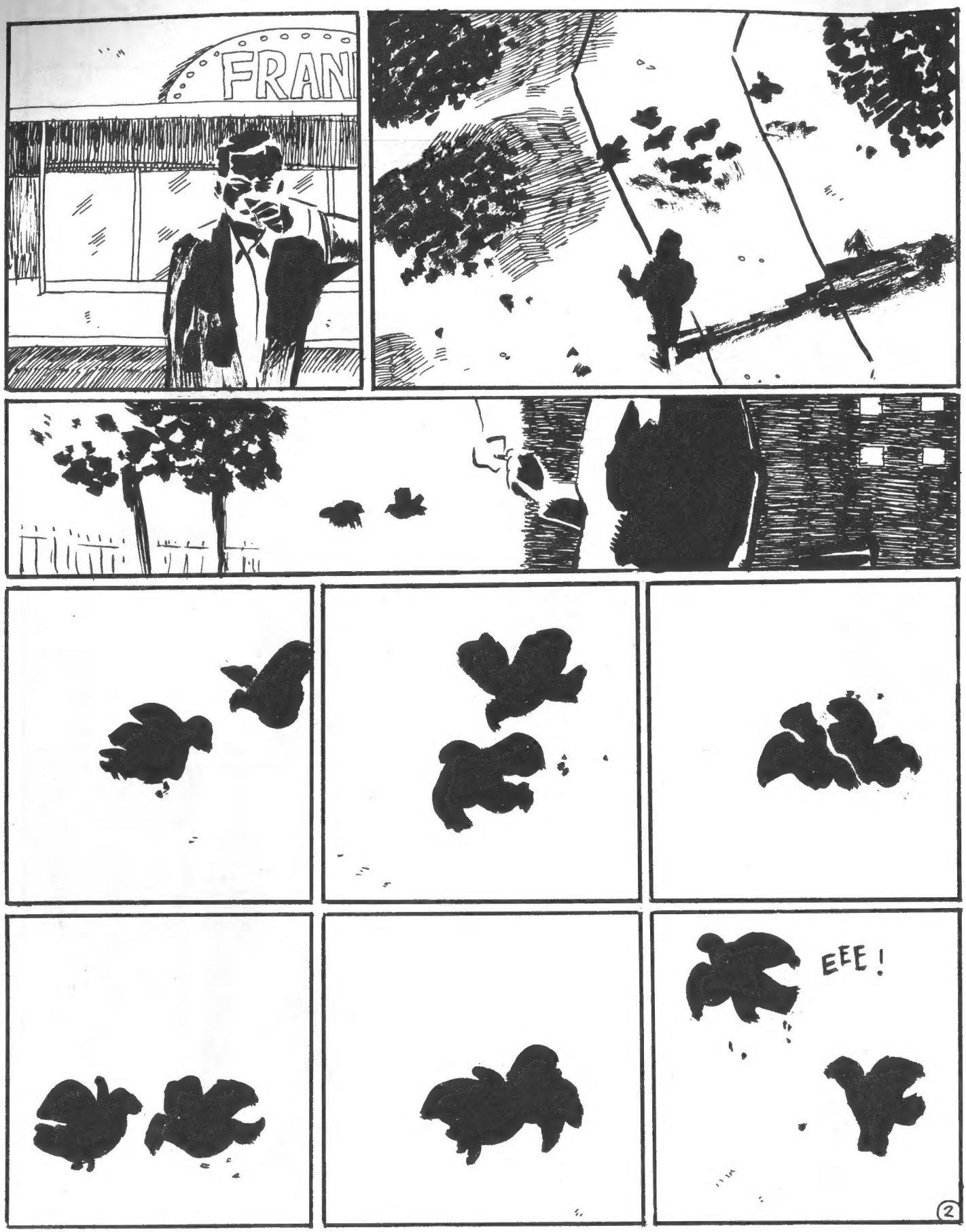
THE FIVE CENT NICKEL by DYLAN WILLIAMS—
DID YOU JUST GET BACK?
YEAH, I GOT IN SOME TROUBLE IN NEW YORK.
I WAS WORKING...
..YOU KNOW, I DON'T REALLY WANT TO GO INTO IT.
I JUST WANT TO MOVE ON, LEAVE THAT JUNK IN THE PAST.
DO YOU STILL WANT THAT COFFEE, WALKER?
I'LL BE IN IN A MINUTE PAL, GO AHEAD
1.


FRAN
EEE!
2

ALL I WANT IS YOUR MONEY.
OKAY MAN, HOLD IT!
3.

4.

OPEN
HEY, WHAT'S WRONG?
COULD YOU SPOT ME A BUCK FOR SOME COFFEE.
-the end.

an interview with Chris Oliveros
conducted by Jeff LeVine over the telephone on Sunday, February 19th

Jeff: I was just looking through the first issue of the second volume of *Drawn & Quarterly* and I read the *63 Rue de la Grange aux Belles* and I really liked it. What's weird is that the first time I read it, I remember it didn't make any impression on me at all, but today, I was laughing out loud.

Chris: I really like that story. It's the type of thing where if you go through it too quickly you can say, "What is this? Ten pages...and there's nothing to read...it's just pictures," but when you actually look at it and look at each panel, it's so well done. I was kind of disappointed that more people didn't like it more. Actually even a couple people told me that they didn't really like it. Which is too bad, because it's sort of subtle, and the way they use those pictograms in the place of language, I thought was very effective.

Jeff: Exactly! And it was funny.

Chris: Yeah...it was hilarious! I cracked up. I think even if I looked at it now I'd cracked up.

Jeff: So anyway, to start at the beginning...when and where were you born?

Chris: Oh, one of these questions (laughs). Let's see...where was here in Montreal, and when was in 1966.

Jeff: Did you grow up in Montreal?

Chris: Even though I was born in Montreal, I actually grew up in this awful suburb of Montreal, as I guess most middle class kids typically do. It was just your typical suburb. You know suburbs, you could be in Chicago, Philadelphia, or anywhere in the world, and they all look the same. I grew up in a suburb to the north of Montreal, and Chester Brown and Julie Doucet were in a suburb south of Montreal. None of us actually lived on the island of Montreal.

Jeff: You didn't know them growing up, right?

Chris: No. Definitely not. I don't think knew each other.

Jeff: When did you get interested in comics?

Chris: I can remember being interested in comics from the time I was very young. I think my brother was the first to buy them. He was three years older than me. He picked up some typical comics of the day, like Superman, Batman or whatever, so that helped. They were laying around and I would read them as well. I think something that also helped was the fact that, oddly enough, my father sort of liked comics as well. Even though a lot of them were kind of shitty comics, but at the time, this would have been some time in the seventies, there was this company called Warren...they did these magazines called *Creepy, Eerie* and *Vampirella*, and he actually bought them on a regular basis, so they were actually laying around the house. And then later on, he would buy *Heavy Metal*, which also was a pretty horrendous magazine. But maybe just the fact that there were comics around the house sort of helped to keep our interest in it. I think he also bought some old collections as well. I know there were Lil' Abner books, and we had *The Encyclopedia of Comics* laying around as well.

Jeff: How did that lead into starting your own publishing company?

Chris: Okay. As I got older, as I guess is typical with many kids who read comics, I think I started to lose interest when I was around fourteen or fifteen, in you know, Superman, or Batman, which I'd probably bought up until that time. And then...oh yeah, actually maybe this is owed to my father as well, because he actually bought a couple of Crumb collections, and they were laying around the house. I discovered those, and I thought they were pretty funny. And then somehow, around the same time, I discovered the Freak Brothers and Wonder-Warthog, by Gilbert Shelton, and at the time I thought it was funny. I'm kind of afraid to go back to it now, because maybe it's awful, or something. But as a fifteen year old, it was pretty good.

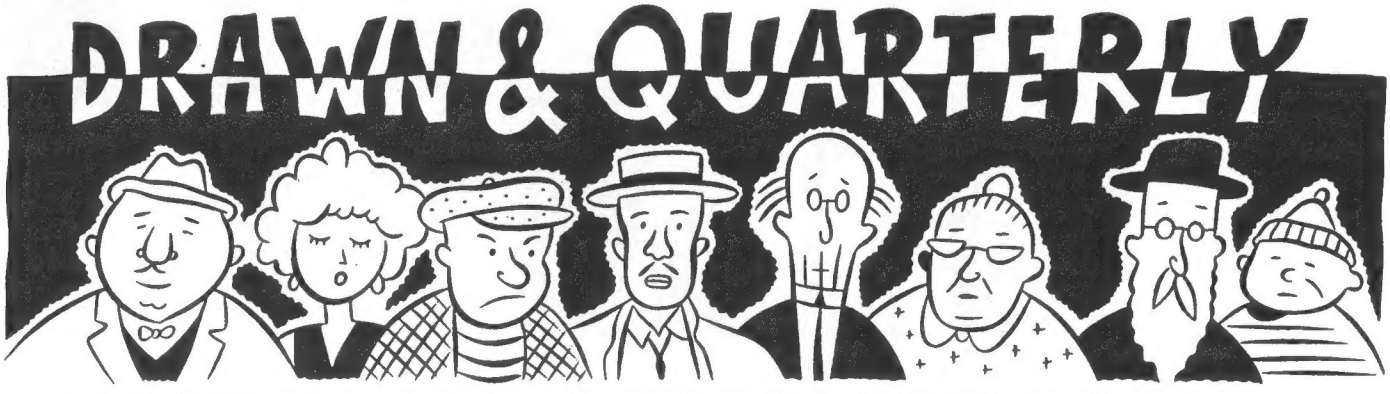
I kind of see the main breakthrough for me, in terms of discovering good comics was when I saw the first issue of *RAW* magazine, which I think was only a few months after it came out. I was about fifteen I think, and I went to visit my brother's apartment one day, and then he just took out this large magazine, which was *RAW* #1, and it was like nothing I'd ever seen before. It really had an effect on me. I remember looking at the stories...there was one story in particular, called *Manhattan* by Jacques Tardi, and I was very very impressed with that. There was also the one that Spiegelman did, I forget the title of it, but it was with Mattise...something to do with mixing colors and Mattise, and I really enjoyed that as well. So, I think that had a tremendous effect on me, in the sense that from there I was able to see that comics did have this enormous potential that was only beginning to be tapped into. So that's my experience as a youth with comics.

Jeff: Did you originally want to draw comics?

Chris: Yeah, well I was drawing comics, I guess from from as far back as I can remember, from the time I was a kid, maybe from the time I was nine or ten, maybe even younger. I was in grade three I think. Initially I was drawing typical stuff...superhero stuff, or whatever. And then I can remember, when I was fourteen or fifteen, after I had discovered the Crumb and Gilbert Shelton stuff, I would draw these undergroundish type of comics, which were of course horrendous. Then I sort of continued here and there, over the next few years.

Jeff: Did you go to college?

Chris: Yeah. After I finished high school, here in Montreal, I moved to New York for a couple of years, and there I went to a school called the Art Students League, which I really enjoyed a lot. I think I took two different classes there, but the one that I enjoyed the most, was a life drawing class, where rather than drawing sketches from models in a little sketchpad, we would



a page from Jacques Tardi's "Manhattan" in *RAW* #1

But I must say I don't have any talent for living, I don't know HOW to live... ... I mean "live well." I don't have any taste for life.... Everything bores me.
28
541-7200
5212-TB
My enthusiasms are short-lived, I know that—afterwards it's worse than before—so I squelch them. Under these conditions you can see why it's hard to get up in the morning.
7 HOUR SERVICE
TAXI
541-7200
All right, I know I'm laying it on too thick.... But don't think I'm doing it for kicks. It was necessary for us to get to know each other.
5212-TB
All this was just to say that it was natural that, sooner or later, I'd feel like drifting around MANHATTAN again.
NO LEFT TURN
FRANKFURTERS
HAMBURGERS

take these gigantic easels and we would by these rolls of paper, and so we would unroll the paper and make these drawing that were about five or six feet tall. It was something I really enjoyed a lot. I wasn't really doing to many comics at that time. I was around eighteen, and for the most part I think I had sort of forgotten about comics, except for the occasional issue of *RAW*.

Jeff: At that point, what were you interested in doing?

Chris: Of course I had no idea that I'd be a comic publisher, or anything like that. It was the furthest thing from my imagination. At that point I also didn't want to become a comic book artist, which I think I wanted to become when I was younger. I think I wanted to become an artist, although I sort of had an inkling that it would be a very difficult thing to do, because I didn't really know anybody that could make a living off of just art. If you did paintings and you tried to have shows and so on, it seemed like it would be a very tough existence. But I guess I was just idealistic and I just wanted to do art, and I thought it would work out somehow.

Jeff: What was that like living in New York?

Chris: This was from '84 until early '86, and I enjoyed it a lot. I don't think I'd want to live there again. I enjoy visiting there, but it's a very intense city, and it's a little bit angst ridden living there all the time. People in general are a lot meaner. I know when I go back there, I find it kind of amusing seeing these things because I'm just not used to it. You know, I'm walking down the street, and there's this couple and then the man will speak to her and say, "Shut up, you bitch!" And you just don't see things like that around here. It's sort of unsettling, I guess, but yeah...a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there again.

Jeff: After New York and school, what was the next thing for you?

Chris: Well, when I came back to Montreal, I guess I was still fairly young, I guess I was about twenty, then I went to college here in Montreal, but rather than being an art school...it was a liberal arts education, so it was literature, philosophy, and psychology, and whatever else you throw into a liberal arts education. I think that's always good to have. You should never go from high school to art school, and then not do anything else. So I did two or two-and-a-half years of that.

When I finished that, then this is how I sort of got back into comics, after several years of not being in it. There was a rag-tag group of people in the summer of '88, who somehow got government money, they got this grant, and their project was to do a comics anthology magazine. I thought that sounded pretty interesting, so I got involved in it. And the magazine was just horrendous, as would usually be the case when you have several different people who have different ideas of how they want to form the magazine. But I ended up working there for a couple of months...

Jeff: Do you remember what that magazine was called?

Chris: It's called *Core*, and I think a couple issues came out. But as I was working there, I sort of started learning about the basic things...like dealing with printers, distributors and whatnot, and as I was working there I thought, "Maybe this isn't so hard to do after all, and maybe I could do a better job myself, if I wasn't working with these people." So I quit later that summer, and the project ended up dissolving anyway another couple of months later. And from then on, I just had this idea in my mind to start this magazine. I was intent on starting this magazine, and then for the next year and a half or so, I was thinking and planning it out, and finally, in early 1990, we came out with the first issue of *Drawn & Quarterly*.

Jeff: How did you put that together, find the artists and select what work to put in there?

Chris: I think the first bit of it was...I had the mistaken notion that there were tons of talented cartoonists out there, who weren't getting published. I thought, "They're out there, there are hundreds of them out there, and all I have to do is put an ad in some paper and we'll get these great submissions, and we'll have the basis of our magazine." So what I did was, I put one or two ads in the Village Voice, and I think in a couple magazines as well...I think Mother Jones even. I'm not sure why I chose that. So, we got quite a few responses, and of course, a lot of them were horrendous. There was actually one response we got, that ended being from this woman named Anne Bernstein, who ended up doing the cover of the first issue of *Drawn & Quarterly*, and one thing sort of led to another, because when I spoke to Anne, she in turn knew another cartoonist, J.D. King, and she gave me his number. So then I called up J.D., and then J.D. said, well why don't you call Peter Bagge, and then I call up Peter Bagge, and so on. So one thing sort of led to another. The funny thing is that that first issue, we had published Peter Bagge, J.D. King, and Dennis Worden, but they were all reprints (laughs), and of course, I would never do that now, or I wouldn't have do it shortly afterwards, but I guess I was excited in getting these people in, so I just thought I'll put them in the first issue. So that's essentially how we started getting material.

Once we had the first issue out, it was a lot easier to get people, because we at least had something, and we could contact people easier.

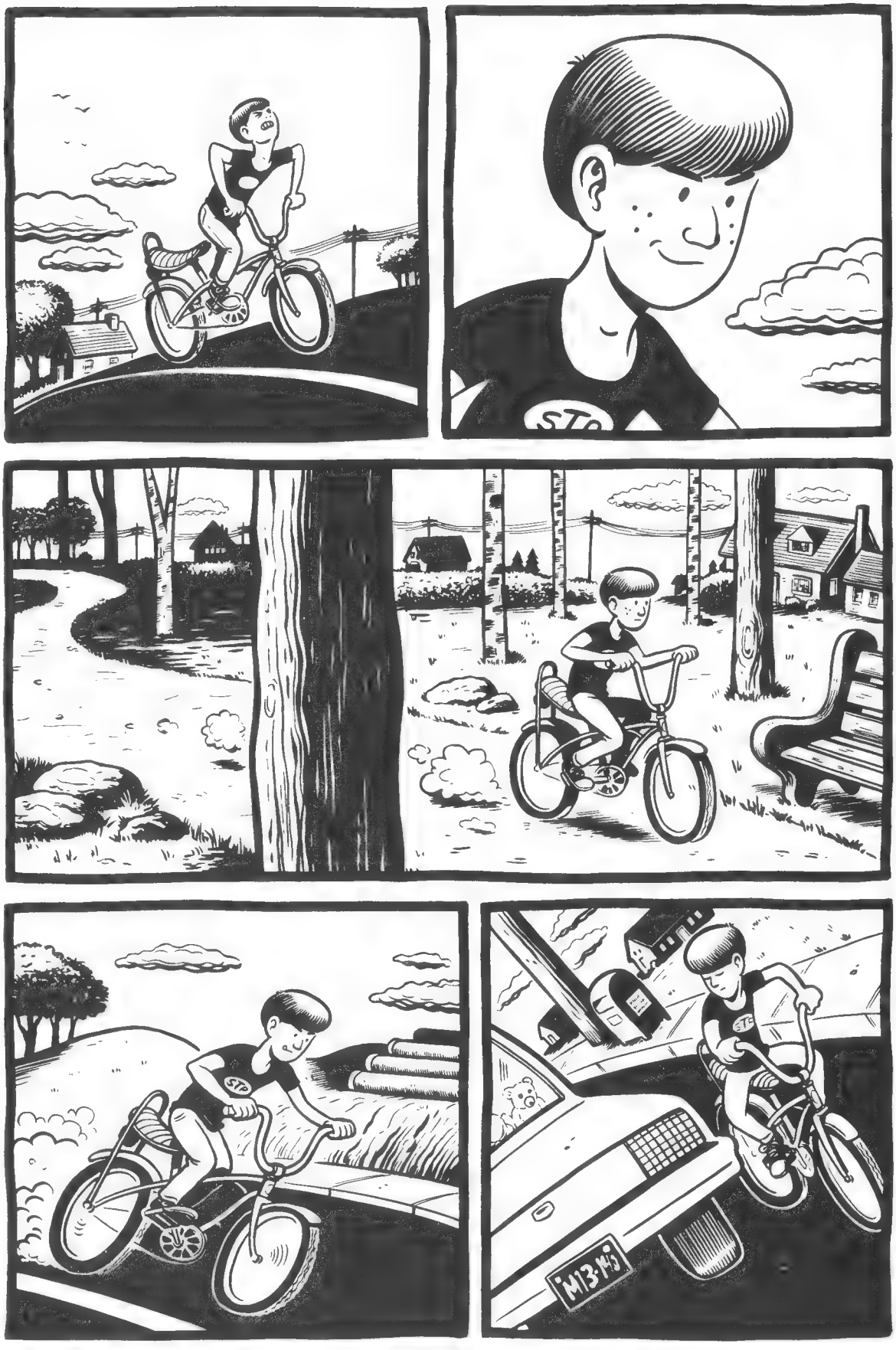
Jeff: If seems like there's a real philosophy behind the magazine that developed, is that...

Chris: Yeah, definitely. In the early issues of *Drawn & Quarterly*, I was definitely learning as I went along, and I can't bear to look back at them now. Just about a week ago, I stumbled across one of the early issues, I think it was number three or something, and it had been at least two or three years since I had seen it, and I couldn't believe just how awful it was. It was like look at some cheap fanzine. I think in the early issues, I was publishing what I could get, and because I knew we weren't really professional, I guess I was sort of aiming to be professional, and I knew it would take a while, but I think the most important thing was that I was sort of developing my own sensibilities. I mean, things that I published in those first ten issues, many of those things I would never even touch now. So it was just a learning process of these things developing very gradually.

Jeff: When did you decide to start publishing individual artists comics as well as the anthology magazine?

Chris: You know what, it was never really a conscious decision. Another thing about it, when I started the magazine, I had this crazy idea that the magazine could work on its own, and that if we really worked at it and made a good magazine, it would be sort of like the *New Yorker* or *Harper's*, but it would be showcasing comic book stories, and we could get distribution on newsstands, and so on. It was a very naive notion that I had. But in any case, shortly after we came out with the first issue and I started meeting other people, and speaking with other people, I met Julie Doucet, who was living in Montreal at the time. We had published two or three of her strips, and when I was speaking with her she was mentioning to me that her goal was to have her own regular comic book title published. And so I thought about it for a while and then gave her a call and asked her if she was interested, and of course she was. So we started Dirty Plotte, and it wasn't part of a big plan that I had. We started that within months after we came out with the first issue of *Drawn & Quarterly*, and then another three months later or so we met Seth, and I really loved his work. And coincidentally, he also had this comic book project, Palooka-Ville, which he was about to start shopping around to other publisher. Then I met him and I asked him if he wanted to do it, and he did. We were very lucky in a

a page from Joe Matt's Peepshow



lot of these cases, sort of being at the right place at the right time. After we took on these other two titles, it sort of seemed like a natural thing to do, to publish other cartoonists.

Jeff: When you first started publishing book like that, what was it like in terms of trying to get them into stores, advertising, and things like that? Did you find it exciting, or frustrating or...

Chris: Yeah...a little bit of the two. It's exciting in the sense of starting something new and something that you really enjoy, and something that you think more people should see and so on. But it's always been frustrating. I mean, from the beginning, and up until now...I know there will always be a certain level of frustration, for years and years. It's been frustrating because we could never really get a wide audience for this. As I mentioned before, having this naive notion that these comics could reach a wider audience and perhaps be distributed on newsstands, is obviously not the case. In the beginning, I had this idea, that most people who had the capabilities to recognize something that's good, even if they don't read comics, if they see something that's well done, they could recognize that. If you could recognize that in literature and music, there's no reason that you shouldn't be able to recognize that in another medium. So I had that naive notion that that was the case. As I found out since then, I don't think that is the case. I think the general public has a tremendous barrier to comic books, and most people aren't able to recognize something that's well done.

Jeff: Do you have a theory as to why that is?

Chris: I think it's because the only comics that people are introduced to, from the time they're young, up until the time they're adults, they're just the worst kinds. On one side you have the daily newspaper strips, which pretty much everybody has come across, at one point or another in their lives, and those are just wretched. And then you have the mainstream type comic book stuff, the Marvel and DC material, which is wretched on another level. If for years and years, from the time you're a young child, you're bombarded with this mediocre material, and you don't see even one single sample of good material within this medium it's no wonder that they're going to have their eyes closed to it. The experience that I've had when I've shown people material, and it could be some of the stuff we publish, or maybe it could even be *RAW* or whatever, is that they look at it with this extreme look of puzzlement on their faces, and they just don't know what to make of it. It was really strange. I remember once, this was several years ago, I went to somebody's house, these were people that I went to college with (the one here in Montreal), and the college I went to, being a liberal arts college, and the program I was in, had a lot of liberal, lefty-types of students, were generally open to many things, they were open to a lot of so called alternative culture, and I remember I brought over some comics, and they didn't know what to make of it. They were just looking at it, and one person was saying, "Oh this is really weird." But even something as innocuous as Palooka-Ville, and they could not make heads or tails of it. It was like a child trying to take a block and putting it into a circle, and it doesn't fit. It just didn't fit any sort of preconception that they had. I think that experience is very typical of the general public.

Jeff: And you felt that they couldn't get beyond their preconception?

Chris: I don't think so. I think people close themselves off to something different like that, because if you really look at it, it would take a tremendous ability to get beyond their preconceptions, which requires a lot of work. It's a lot easier just to not look at it, which is what I think people choose to do. Ironically, I find that because people aren't really able to judge what is good and what is bad in this medium, this is another astonishing thing that I've come across, can't actually tell the difference in the artistic value of..let's say, a Superman comic book and something on Drawn & Quarterly. They sort of lump it all together, and you could say this is drawn in a certain style and a certain sensibibility, and this other type of sensibility, but they'll shrug their heads. I actually had one guy that I met, about a year ago, he's sort of a neighbor, and he actually compared it to a Superman comic he saw recently.

Jeff: (laughs)

Chris: I'm not making this up.

Jeff: Maybe you could tell me a little bit about some of the different artists you've published?

Chris: ...

Jeff: I have a list, if that would help?

Chris: Okay, that might help to pinpoint it a bit more.

Jeff: How about Joe Matt's *Peepshow*? That's a book you haven't talked about yet, and I believe the ninth issue is just about to come out...

Chris: Yeah. So what do you want to know about Joe Matt that you don't already know?

Jeff: Well, how about the story of how *Peepshow* started?

Chris: Let's see...I actually met Joe before the first issue of *Drawn & Quarterly* came out, so this sort of connects with that whole period when I was getting together with these people, because at that time, Joe was actually living in Montreal, and I wrote him a letter, and he came knocking on our door once. At the time, he was doing all those one page diary strips, which I really enjoyed, and I believe that actually made it into the first issue of *Drawn & Quarterly*. So his work was featured in every single issue of *Drawn & Quarterly*, up until the sixth or seventh issue, and he was finishing up his cartoon diary, he was thinking of starting a series, so naturally I asked him if he wanted to do it for us, and he's been doing it ever since then.

In particular what I know about Joe, yes, everything he says in his comics are true, except he's much worse in person.

Jeff: How does *Peepshow* sell for you?

Chris: It does fine. It was really picking up in the first few issues, and he was actually coming out with an issue every four months or so, and then everything was doing better, and it led to the point where he was chosen by *Rolling Stone*, as their alleged hot-cartoonist, two years ago, and then after that he almost stopped drawing. His personal life overcame his work life. He was chasing all these women around, and he's really neurotic about that. So eventually, he came up with this current storyline, and I have to admit, I'm somewhat cool towards it, I mean, maybe I'll like it more when it's wrapped up, but I had my criticisms about it, which I always tell Joe, and as far as I know, I think everybody else tells him they're criticisms, including Chester and Seth, but he doesn't seem to listen to anybody. So we just have to hope that his own judgement will serve him well.

Jeff: That brings to mind another question that I had, which is, do you exercise any editorial control over the books you publish, or what's your relationship towards the different artists?

Chris: There's no editorial control. I mean, I guess I see this relationship in the same way that I would see a publisher of literature when they would find a new author, I guess they would sign a contract for this author to do a novel, or maybe several novels, and when you do get to that point, you have confidence in the ability of that author, so you're not going to sit down and change it, and say, "Don;t write this type of story, you've gotta write this action stuff." So when we do come to that agreement, whether it's with Joe, or Julie, or Seth, or whomever, it's because we have that level of confidence in their abilities. If it does get to the point where we change our mind, and we don't like their work anymore, or whatever, there's always our contract, which range any-

where from three to six issue, and we always have the option not to renew it. There have been cases where it hasn't really worked out, and we just wouldn't publish it anymore.

Jeff: Is that the same with *Drawn & Quarterly*...how do you select which artists do you use, and do you make any suggestions which direction to go, or do the artists that you pick for that just sort of have free reign?

Chris: It sort of depends from artist to artist. I know we use far fewer cartoonists than we used before in the initial run of Drawn & Quarterly, well mostly because the stories are long, but also because there are very few cartoonists who I can trust to do something good. I think usually with the people that we choose, I know they can come up with something good, and that's not a problem. In most cases we actually do get like a penciled version, and I'm not saying we go from panel to panel saying, change this or change that, it's just for us to get an idea of what the story is like. With most cases we approve it at that stage without really having to say...maybe you should change this a little bit or...

Jeff: So do you tend to approach an artist to specifically make a work for *Drawn & Quarterly*?

Chris: Yeah. There are two different kinds. A lot of the European work that we publish exists already, so let's say some of the French work, we have the French comic albums that were published, so we read it and the work is already completed so we can tell whether we like it or not, and then we buy the rights to the work. On the other level, with the North American cartoonists, we ask them to do something...like in this issue that's at the printer now, Debbie Drechsler has done a new story, and as I was talking with her in the last few months, she agreed to do it, and then she sent me a fax of the initial story, which to me was perfect, and then she just completed it.

Jeff: That's exciting. She doesn't do much comics work.

Chris: Yeah, well she's actually starting to do quite a bit of comics work now, and we're actually supposed to be publishing a regular series by her, which I guess would begin sometime in the fall. She thinks it can come out at least two or three times a year.

Jeff: Do you know anything about what the content of that new series might be like?

Chris: Well, she's planning it out now. She's unsure if it'll be like one long story per issue, or if it'll be several short stories. It'll probably start off being several short stories, because that's what she's done and that's what she's used to. Perhaps it'll evolve into her doing longer stories.

Jeff: Another artist I wanted to ask you about, was one of the reprint ones, from Finland, Pentti Otsamo. That was a story that I really liked...

Chris: He also has a story in this issue that's at the printer now, which I think is actually better than that first one, because he's a cartoonist who I think excels in a longer story. His storytelling focuses on everyday events, and his stories unravel at a slow, subtle pace. So he's going to have a story in the next issue, and he's actually also working on a book for us, that will be, I guess, fifty or sixty pages long, so it'll be one self-contained story.

Jeff: Will that be in full-color also?

Chris: No, that's going to be in black and white. Actually the one he's done for us, for this current issue is also in black and white, and he has this very nice, loose style, that I think looks probably at least as good as his color work.

Jeff: Do you know anything about him, or other work that he's done?

Chris: Apparently, he's a pretty popular comic artist in Finland, but I'm not sure what it means to be a popular comic artist in Finland (laughs), but there is some kind of comic award in Finland, and apparently he's won this award. He's going to have a book collection published there, full of his short stories. And he does a lot of advertising work, illustration work for magazines, and I think that's how he makes his living.

Jeff: What about Adrian Tomine and his comic *Optic Nerve*, which I believe is the most recent comic you've started publishing...how did that come about, and how is it going?

Chris: Adrian started sending me his mini-comics, from the beginning I guess, which may have been as long ago as '91, or

YOU KNOW, LILY, YOU SHOULDN'T ACT SO EAGER WITH BOYS.
WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT? HUH, MOM?
IF A BOY KNOWS THAT YOU LIKE HIM, HE'LL LOSE INTEREST. IT'S A PROVEN FACT OF LIFE.
THAT'S THE DUMBEST THING I EVER HEARD.
LOOK, HONEY, YOU'RE YOUNG. WHAT DO YOU KNOW? PLAY A LITTLE HARD TO GET. YOU'LL SEE. ANYWAY...
THIS ONE'S NICE, BUT YOU COULD DO MUCH BETTER.

a page from Debboe Drechsler's recent Fantagraphic's collection

a page from Pentti Otsamo's "Fishing" in D & Q #5

four panels from Optic Nerve #2, by Adrian Tomine

IT ISN'T UNTIL A SPLIT-SECOND AFTERWARDS THAT I REALIZE I'VE BEEN HIT. MY NOSE EXPLODES AND I DROP TO THE PAVEMENT. IT OCCURS TO ME THAT IT'S THE FIRST TIME I'VE EVER REALLY BEEN PUNCHED.
I KNOW I SHOULD GET UP AND PUNCH BACK OR RUN OR SAY SOMETHING, BUT PAIN AND DISBELIEF GRIP ME AND I JUST LIE THERE, SILENT. I CAN'T EVEN RESIST WHEN THE DRIVER DRAGS ME OFF THE SIDEWALK, INTO THE GUTTER.
HE SAYS SOMETHING THAT I DON'T QUITE UNDERSTAND, AND THEN SAYS IT AGAIN WHEN I DON'T RESPOND.
BITE THE CURB.
I LOOK UP AT HIS FACE AS HE REPEATS HIMSELF, THIS TIME MUCH LOUDER. I MAKE A SUDDEN MOVE TO GET UP AND HE KICKS ME HARD IN THE SIDE AND I WONDER WHY NO ONE IS DOING ANYTHING TO STOP THIS.
DO IT!

something like that. I probably should have written to him sooner, and I feel bad for not doing that (laughs), but I didn't. But he still kept on sending them to me, and I liked his work, and I just wanted to see how he would develop. On the other hand, the interesting thing was, that I just felt that he was some guy in his twenties, doing this stuff. I had no idea that he was sixteen or seventeen. By the fifth or sixth issue, somebody told me he was eighteen, or whatever he was at the time, and I just couldn't believe it. I think also when you have that information you sort of look at the material in a completely different light. I think also, I forget, it was around his fifth or sixth issue that I wrote him a letter. From what I can remember I thought it was a letter of encouragement. I may have had a couple points of criticism, and said I really admired your work, and keep up the good work, but Adrian tells me another story, he says that he was, I forget what he said, maybe hurt or something (laughs), because he said that I was very harsh with him (laughs). I would like to see this letter, because apparently he still has it, so I told him to send me a copy, but he hasn't sent me one yet. So I think maybe a few months later after that point, I saw his work some more, and I started to like it a lot more, not that I didn't like it before, but I could really see him improving a lot. And the funny thing is, I remember Joe Matt was also telling me, "You've gotta publish this guy, Adrian Tomine. Don't miss out on him," so finally I just gave him a call, and that was that.

Yeah, with Adrian's comic, with *Optic Nerve*, he's sort of one of the cartoonists that sort of gives me more hope in being a publisher. I could maybe think of these people like Adrian, Seth, Chris Ware...I'm talking even people I don't publish like Chris Ware, Jason Lutes and so on. Because I think these people are doing more serious work in this medium, rather than focusing on a lot of silly or goofy or pseudo-subversive type of stories that you tend to find in a lot of alternative comics, they're trying to aim for something higher. I'm not trying to sound like a snob or anything (laughs), but something with more substance. So yeah, I'm glad that we're publishing Adrian stuff, because I think it's the type of work that can reach beyond that typical, tiny alternative comics market.

Jeff: Talk to me a little about Chester Brown.

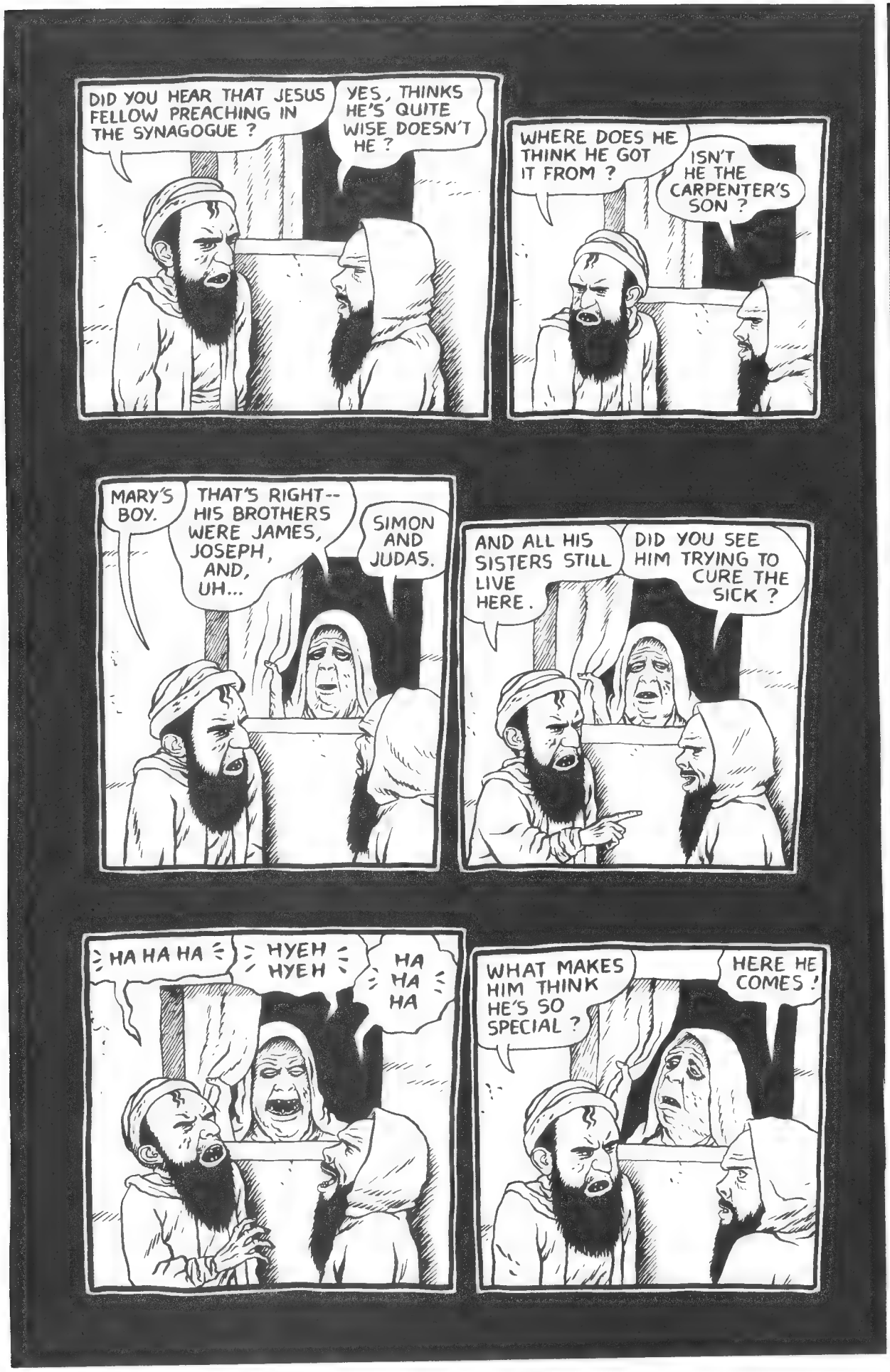
Chris:...Chester seemingly doesn't care about any type of negative criticism he gets. Everybody wanted him to continue doing Ed the Happy Clown, and at that point, this was six or seven years ago, he was getting a lot of favorable press from Ed the Happy Clown, and then all of a sudden he started doing these autobiographical comics and he got a lot of pretty nasty comments or reviews and so on, but he kept on doing it, and I think he's done some of his best work with his autobiographical stories. On the other hand you can look at something like *Underwater*, and maybe the jury is still out on that, but you have to say that he is brave in doing that. There are not many other artists or writers who would do something like that and withstand that assault of criticism.

Jeff: Do you think he'll be able to withstand it and complete all twenty issues?

Chris: He'll definitely be able to complete all twenty issues, whether it will be a great work, or whether it will be a mess (laughs), or whether it will be a so-so work with potential, it remains to be seen. I don't know...at this point it could go any way. I tend to have more confidence in him, but I'm still aware that it could go any way.

Jeff: Lately, that's what's been exciting about *Underwater* to me...it could go any way. I mean, who knows...it's very unpredictable, and it's a very unpredictable choice as...

a page by Chester Brown


DID YOU HEAR THAT JESUS FELLOW PREACHING IN THE SYNAGOGUE ?
YES, THINKS HE'S QUITE WISE DOESN'T HE ?
WHERE DOES HE THINK HE GOT IT FROM ?
ISN'T HE THE CARPENTER'S SON ?
MARY'S BOY.
THAT'S RIGHT-- HIS BROTHERS WERE JAMES, JOSEPH, AND, UH...
SIMON AND JUDAS.
AND ALL HIS SISTERS STILL LIVE HERE.
DID YOU SEE HIM TRYING TO CURE THE SICK ?
HA HA HA
HYEH HYEH
HA HA HA
WHAT MAKES HIM THINK HE'S SO SPECIAL ?
HERE HE COMES !

Chris: I think with the best creators, artist, writers, etc...I think they're often able to come through the good reviews and bad reviews and so on. Someone like Dan Clowes was getting good reviews from the start, and yet he's evolved tremendously since then. I mean, he's definitely doing his best work now, and he's only getting better with each issue. On the other hand you could take someone like Peter Bagge, who unfortunately, I mean I think he's talented, and he definitely had something going there, but I'm wondering if *Hate* is sterile because maybe he was afraid to change, or I don't know, maybe that was the direction that he would have gone anyway. It's sort of hard to think about these things.

Jeff: Do you think it's a limitation in comics, say for a comic like *Underwater*, to have to come out in a quarterly ten page dose, as opposed to in five years as a six-hundred page book?

Chris: That's interesting, because I think, taking a look at Chester again, when you look at Ed the Happy Clown or the installments from his autobiographical work, he was serializing the stories, and even though he was thinking in the context of that completed book, if you look at the actual issues, I think they tended to end on an interesting note, where it makes you curious and so on, and I think he was conscious of doing that. On the other hand with *Underwater*, I think very consciously, he's avoiding that. He's working on the story and if on page twenty when it ends, it happens to end in this sort of nondescript scene, he'll just end it there, and he doesn't seem to care what people might think about that. In that case he's thinking completely of the collected book, which I think is good. It probably loses readers (laughs), but for the work itself, I think it's good, because you're not manipulating each chapter.

Jeff: Do you think it's possible that there could be more work in the future where the artist could sit and draw for two years, and release the entire story, or do you think just by the way the industry is set up, and with history on the side of the periodical nature of comics...

Chris: I think the periodical approach is a good thing. In order for comics to be released only in book form, where an author would take two or three or five years to complete this novel, the medium would have to attain the sort of popularity you have in general fiction, where you have fifty or a hundred thousand readers, and your best-sellers have five hundred thousand readers, where because you have this guaranteed income, you can get this advance from a publisher of, I don't know, fifty or one-hundred thousand dollars, and then you can afford to work on just your own project for a couple years, That obviously will never come to be in comics, so I think, for better or for worse we're left with this set-up we have here, where the work is gradually being serialized, which in turn allows the author to collect a royalty on those issues. Without that, comics just wouldn't exist. Whether you like it or not, it allows these works to exist, and it allows the author to make some kind of living while the story is being produced.

I have to admit that I always liked that format. I sort of like being a participant, watching this work as it slowly develops, and I think that's sort of interesting.

Jeff: There have been a lot of changes in the industry with distribution lately. How has that affected your publishing?

Chris: In many ways, it hasn't affected it at all, in a negative sense. When you look at the current context, many mainstream publishers, they're orders have dropped dramatically. I think Marvel has just fired something like a quarter or a third of their staff, which is all pleasant news to hear. Luckily our orders have been pretty stable. I think the only area where I can see it affecting us negatively is that because comic stores in general, almost all of them are teetering between bankruptcy and just getting their bills paid, stores are very careful when it comes to ordering certain things, particular books, because these items are not returnable. So anytime you have something with a higher cover price, anything that's higher than four dollars, or something, the orders tend to be a lot lower than they normally would be. I notice with the books in general that the orders are pretty lousy. So, I guess that's the only negative thing I can think of now.

Jeff: But the comics are staying pretty stable.

Chris: The comics are pretty stable. Even when we had to raise the cover price, because of the increases in paper prices, they didn't go down at all.

Jeff: Yeah, I noticed that the new Underwater was $3.50...are all the comics that you publish going to go up to that price?

Chris: Yeah. There are still a couple that will be coming out throughout this year that will be $2.95, but by the end of the year they'll all be $3.50. It's not 'cause we're greedy, but because...I'm not sure how many people are aware of this, but the price of paper has gone up, it's unbelievable, it's gone up something like 120% or 130% in the last eighteen months alone. I mean this is at a time when overall inflation is supposed to be something like 2%, you have this major item that affects virtually everything that we buy going up 120%. What that translates to, is that the typical printing bill is about 35 to 40% higher than it was in late '94. That's actually the biggest problem that we've faced in the recent past.

Jeff: That's something I've thought about a lot lately. It almost seems like to make a comic book profitable now, you have to price it too high for new readers to even consider buying it.

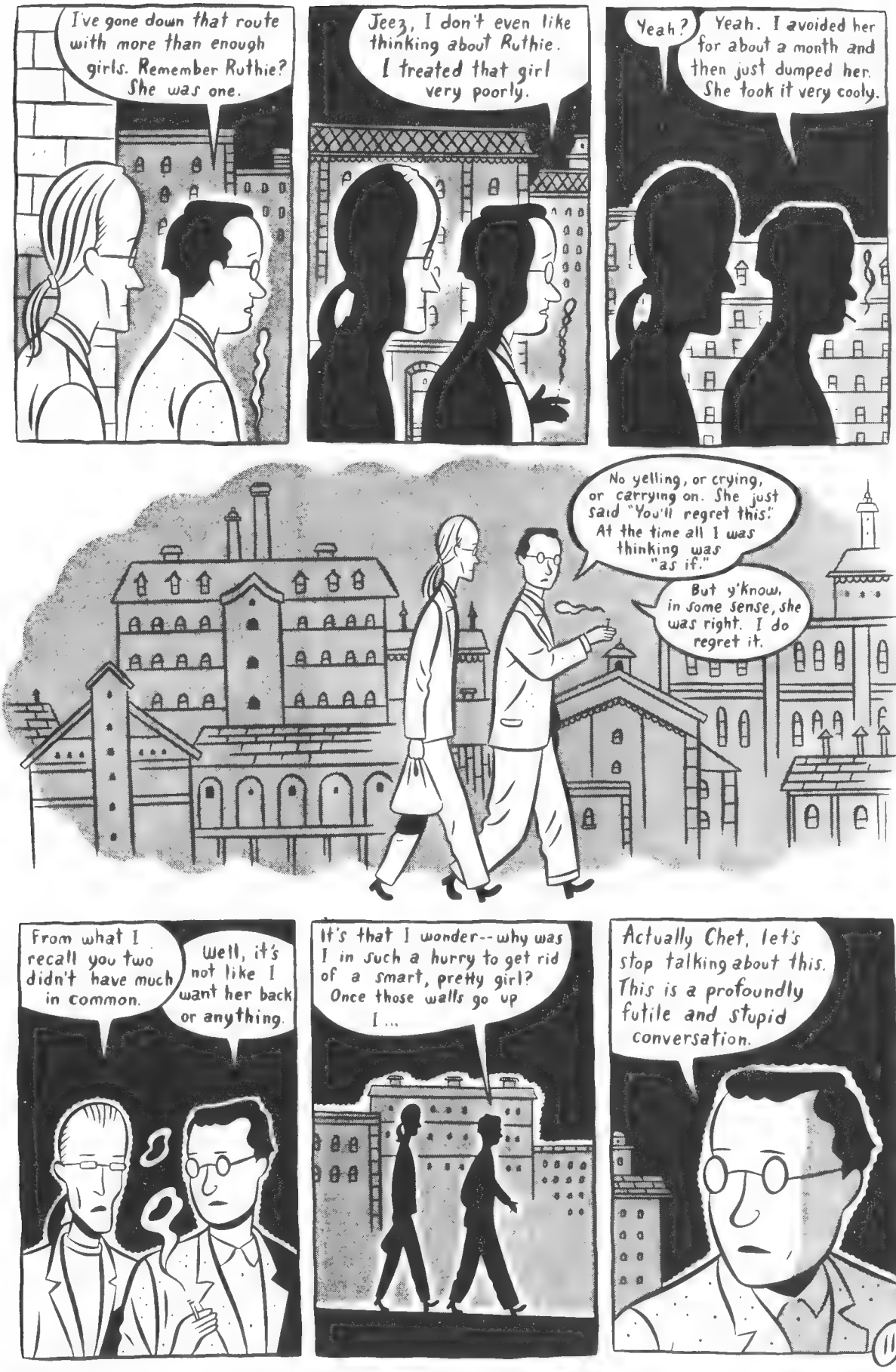
Chris: It's something that's difficult. On the one hand, I was just looking at this and I realized we couldn't keep it at $2.95, what it was before, because we were actually making almost nothing on it, after we'd paid the royalties and everything else involved with the comics...in some cases, even on good selling comics, like *Peepshow* or *Underwater*, we would make almost nothing. To stay in business, we wouldn't be able to keep going like that. On the other hand, the readers just have to be aware of this. I think in the next two or three years, you're going to see anything that's printed with paper, the price of it will skyrocket, from just general magazines and newspapers and so on. Because I think in the publishing industry in general, not just comics, but overall, I think everybody is in a state of denial. I mean, nobody has really increased their prices. Most newsstand magazines are still $2.95, and meanwhile they've taken hits, probably in the millions of dollars, so they've gotta do something about this, or people are going to start going bankrupt.

Jeff: Do you think there's any chance that paper costs are going to do down?

Chris: No, they're not going to go down. I think what happened with the paper manufacturers, it was a cartel of all the paper mills, and they all agreed to raise their prices at the same time, and not have competition, because if only one person had competitive prices, then everybody would lose out on this extra money, but if everybody agreed at the same time then they would make bundles of money. I guess it's something similar to what happened with oil in the 70's with OPEC. Once you have a cartel, there's nothing you can do about that. I don't think they'll go down, but from what I hear lately, it's supposed to stabilize somewhat. I think we've seen the worst of it...it's behind us.

Jeff: That would be nice.

Chris: A lot of these things are relative. Looking at media in general, I never hear of people complaining about the cost of CD's. People plunk down twenty dollars for a CD, when in fact it actually costs about a dollar to manufacture the whole thing. And yet, when it costs much more than that to produce a comic book,


I've gone down that route with more than enough girls. Remember Ruthie? She was one.
Jeez, I don't even like thinking about Ruthie. I treated that girl very poorly.
Yeah?
Yeah. I avoided her for about a month and then just dumped her. She took it very cooly.
No yelling, or crying, or carrying on. She just said "You'll regret this." At the time all I was thinking was "as if."
But y'know, in some sense, she was right. I do regret it.
From what I recall you two didn't have much in common.
Well, it's not like I want her back or anything.
It's that I wonder--why was I in such a hurry to get rid of a smart, pretty girl? Once those walls go up I...
Actually Chet, let's stop talking about this. This is a profoundly futile and stupid conversation.

and people are paying three-fifty and they're complaining about that. I think people have to look at these things in a more relative light.

Jeff: If I can ask you, how many copies do some of the different things you publish sell, like *Drawn & Quarterly* for instance?

Chris: *Drawn & Quarterly* sells a little under four thousand copies, which is an annoyance to me (laughs), because I put in so much work into it, and it costs a lot, and so on. Sure wish it sold more. I guess our better selling titles, like *Peepshow* , *Underwater*, or *Dirty Plotte* sell a little over five thousand. And our best selling title, which is *Optic Nerve*, sells at this point, the sales have been going higher, so it'll probably be higher the third issue, but with the second issue it was close to seven and a half thousand.

Jeff: How does *Palooka-Ville* do?

Chris: Palooka-ville is also somewhat annoying (not the comic, I'm talking about the sales right now) (laughs), in the sense that it actually goes up every issue, but at a painfully slow rate, maybe one or two hundred copies each issue, and now it's a little over four thousand...it's getting to be about four and a half thousand.

I've sort of concluded that readers of alternative comics are just sort of idiots and that once again, most people just won't be able to recognize good material. Usually the more subtle or intelligent something is, the lower the sales are. The only thing that seems to differ from that rule is *Optic Nerve*, which is goofy or something silly that panders to some Generation X type of sensibilities...something like *Hate*.

Jeff: Are you a little frustrated that your highest selling comic is only selling seven thousand, when it's really obviously something you really believe in...when there's a potential audience of hundred of millions of people, or...

Chris (laughs) Not hundreds of millions of people, but I think certainly, *Optic Nerve* could be selling twenty or twenty-five thousand. Hopefully it'll continue to rise until maybe it reaches that level.

Jeff: One thing that strike me as weird about comics is that twenty or twenty-five thousand is like the biggest you can get, but no other media would even consider twenty or twenty-five thousand...

Chris: You mean, like for most other mediums it would just be a write off...it's not even worth doing.

Jeff: Yeah.

Chris: To a large degree, but I think that in each medium there are always marginal elements. Certainly in music, there are a lot of small indie labels, and maybe they sell ten or twenty thousand, or poetry publishers I'm sure are happy to get orders of seven hundred copies. So I mean we probably could be in a worse position, we certainly could be in a better position as well, but yeah...even with something like *Drawn & Quarterly*, I always think that it certainly could be selling more than four thousand. I always even think about the idea I mentioned before, of being the *Harper's* or *New Yorker* of comics. How a lot of people could appreciate this, because the stories that we're publishing now, I really think are very well done, and I sure wish more people would be able to recognize that.

Jeff: How do you sustain your interest in publishing, facing those huge odds...what do you do to stay excited?

Chris: (sighs) I don't know...I always ask myself that. On one level, sometimes when we're publishing something that's very good, I get excited about that, because I'm sort of excited to have an involvement in publishing that work. On the other level, there's a feeling that very few people are taking notice of this. I'm very keenly aware of just how unpopular this material is, and it definitely can get very depressing. In a typical week, I might have some high points, where I feel really great about what I'm doing, but three or four times during the week, I'll be tremendously depressed and thinking that nobody really cares for this work...which is probably true, very few people do. It certainly can get very depressing and demoralizing, but I guess my feeling and approach is that I see it as a lifetime commitment, or a lifetime battle. It's not something where I can say I'm going to work at this for five years and then I'm going to reach my goal, because it's sort of this elusive goal that I know will never really be reached. If I'm working in this for forty years, on my deathbed, I know that comics will still be marginalized, and that my efforts would have produced maybe a small change, but nothing really spectacular.

Jeff: Do you feel it's a failure if comics are marginalized, or do you think it doesn't really matter, as long as good work is done and there are a hundred people who liked it?

Chris: Once again I'm torn between my two instincts, in the sense that, on the one level it doesn't really matter...I don't care about people who can't recognize that it's good, as long as these works are being produced. On the other hand it's damn frustrating just working in this and being so marginalized like this.

Jeff: What kind of projects do you have planned for the future?

Chris: I think I mentioned a couple of them. One was the new series by Debbie Drechsler. The one with the Finnish cartoonist, Pentti Otsamo, that will actually be a part of a series of books that we'll be doing. They'll be slimmer books, about fifty or sixty pages in length, and they'll focus on one story, each by a fairly new cartoonist. He'll have one story, and another book will be by Ariel Bordeaux, who is working on a story as we speak, maybe. So hers will probably be out sometime this fall, and his will be out probably in early '97.

Jeff: What kind of format are those going to be?

Chris: Tentatively they'll be a square format. I sort of wanted to something a little different from that standard comic format. And because they'll be thinner than a normal book, they'll probably be priced somewhere between a comic book and a regular graphic novel, somewhere in the six or seven dollar range.

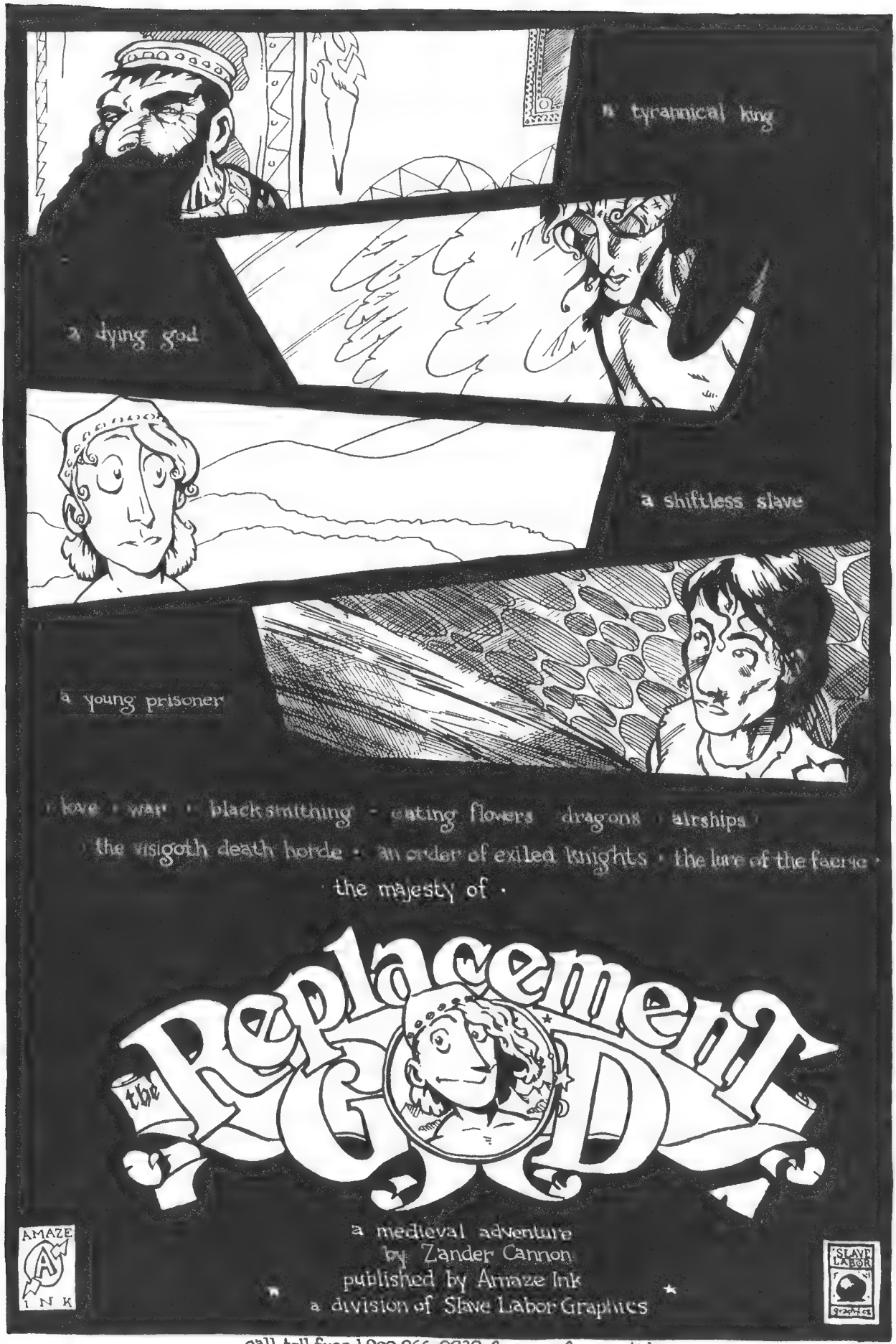
Actually getting back to what you were saying before about these artists serializing their works...I guess this will be one instance where you will actually have a longer story that will be appearing in just that one form, in a book, without being serialized beforehand.

Those are the only two we have committed at the moment. I have a hard time thinking of new cartoonists. Not too many good ones come along, but I'm hoping as the months go along we'll find other people.

Jeff: Is it kind of a plan with you to just kind of slowly put out more stuff? Drawn & Quarterly seems to be one company that doesn't really seem to rush to put more stuff out, but you seem to slowly be building this bigger and bigger thing there...

Chris: I try to be very careful in regards to what we publish, and as I've said, I've made mistakes in the past, things that I've regretted, which has in turn made me even more careful. I don't mean careful in a business sense, where I look at something and say, "ah...this won't make me enough money." I'm sort of careful in a creative sense, in an artistic sense, where if something is good, I would like to publish it. I mean, we are slowly building up, but I always see our company as being small. I just can't imagine us publishing more than ten titles at a time. And I think it will always remain small, largely because I don't think there are enough good cartoonists out there. At the rate that new cartoonists are emerging, maybe every five years there's one or two new promising cartoonists, and so, I think by that definition, it will keep our company small.

the end


a tyrannical king
a dying god
a shiftless slave
a young prisoner
· love · war · blacksmithing · eating flowers · dragons · airships ·
· the visigoth death horde · an order of exiled knights · the lure of the faerie ·
· the majesty of ·
the Replacement GODS
a medieval adventure
by Zander Cannon
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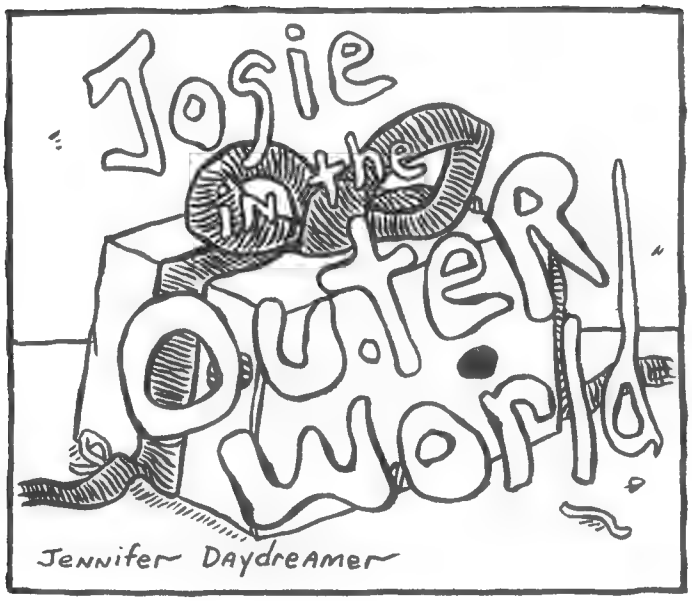
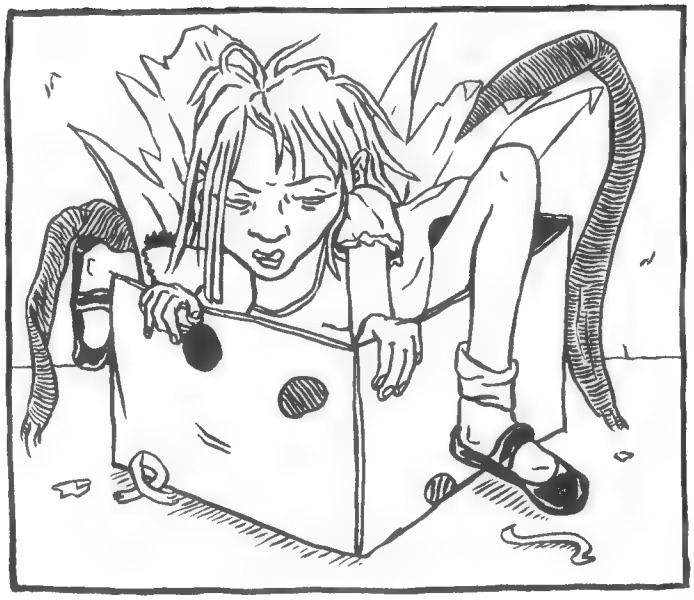
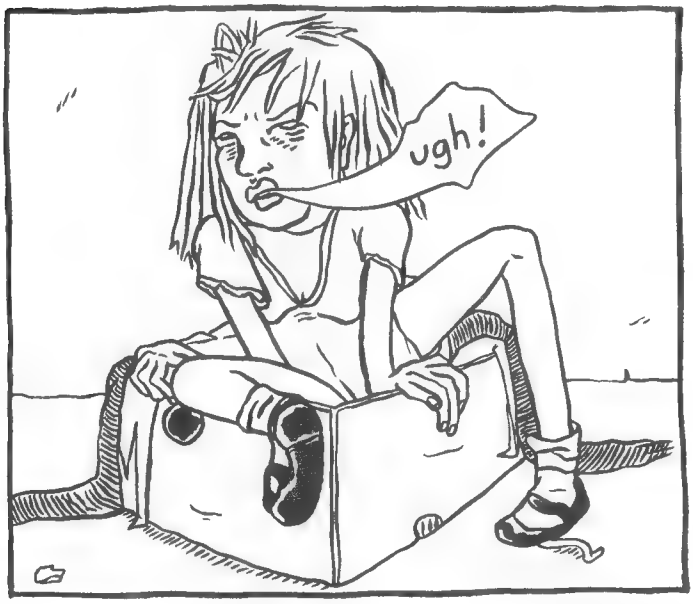
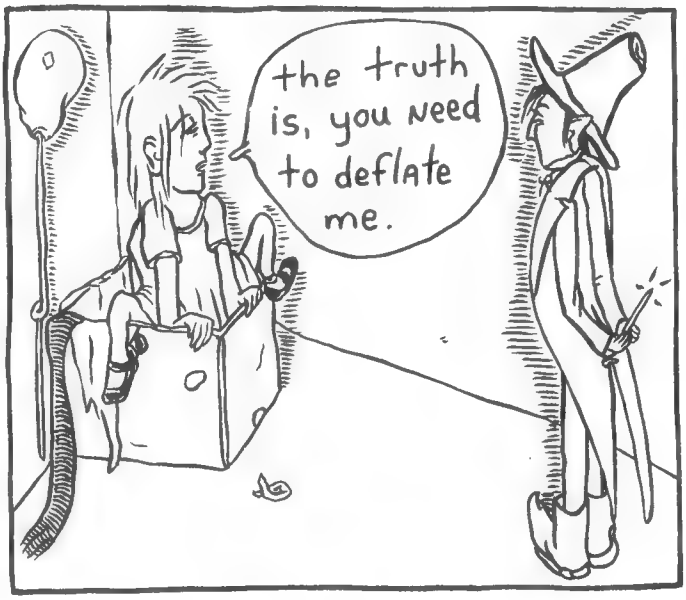

Josie
in the
Outer
World
Jennifer DAydreAmer

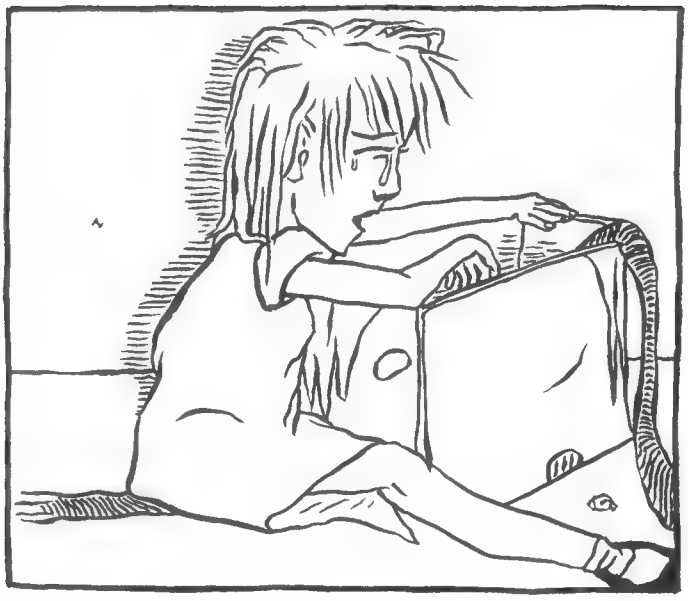



ugh!


the truth is, you need to deflate me.

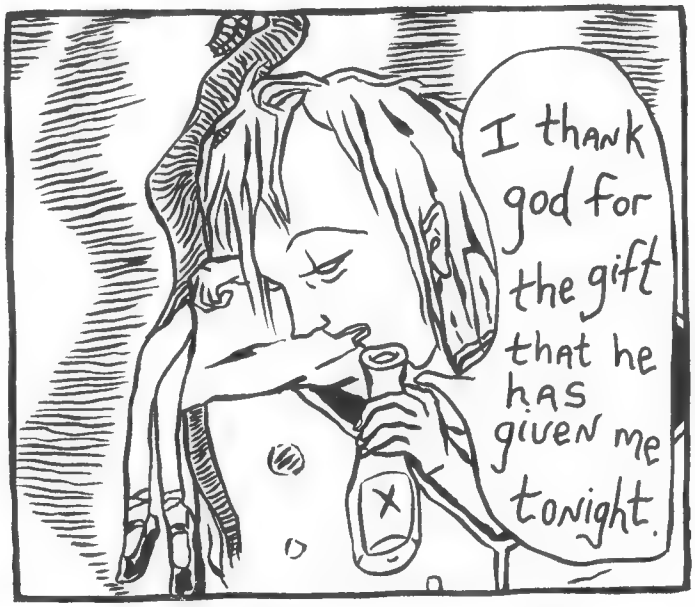
poke
poke
poke

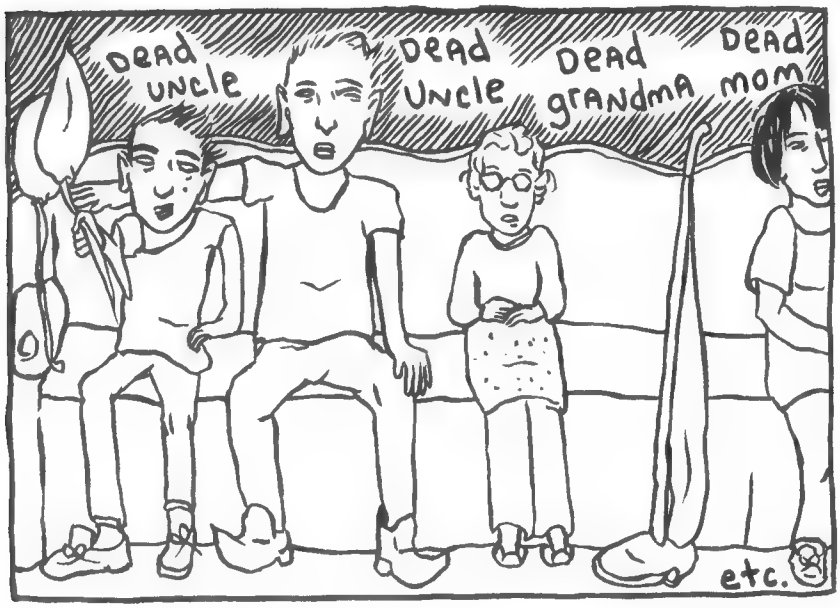
oh, fuck you.



Hey Bitch! What kind of gift CAN you give?

I'm sorry. I'm sorry to all the dead people.


I thank god for the gift that he has given me tonight.


dead uncle
dead uncle
dead grandma
dead mom
etc.

I'm sorry I'm such a surprise.

Mr. Clean, you use to be so innocent.
poke
poke
poke
Why so dramatic?
I'm just going to wrap myself up again.
Fuck!
shiver
shiver
end

HUMAN TUMOR

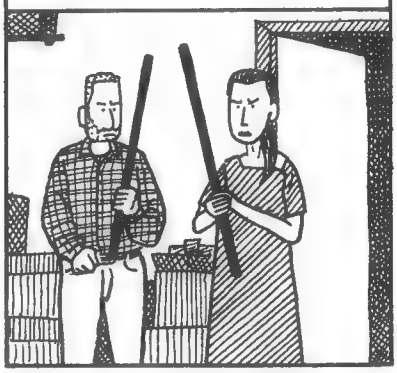
AFTER MANY YEARS OF LIVING ON THE STREETS, POVERTY REDUCED ME TO RECONCILING WITH MY DAD AND STEP-MOM.
THEY LET ME MOVE BACK INTO THEIR HOUSE, BUT I HAD TO DO EVERYTHING THEY SAID.
I WAS VIRTUALLY THEIR SLAVE.
FIRST, YOU HAVE TO WASH ALL THE DISHES...
THEN YOU HAVE TO WALK THE DOG.
ONE DAY I RECEIVED A THICK LETTER FROM BRAZIL ADDRESSED TO SOMEBODY ELSE.
I HELD IT UP TO THE LIGHT AND SAW WHAT APPEARED TO BE MONEY INSIDE, SO I OPENED IT UP.
I WAS VERY SUPRISED TO FIND IT WAS STUFFED WITH ONES, FIVES AND TWENTIES.
UNFORTUNATELY I WAS CALLED INTO THE HOUSE FOR A FAMILY CHURCH MEETING BEFORE I COULD PROPERLY COUNT OR HIDE THE MONEY.
GET IN HERE RIGHT NOW!
QUICKLY I STUFFED SOME IN MY POCKET, BUT I STUPIDLY HID A LOT UNDERNEATH MY ARM.
ONCE I GOT INSIDE THE HOUSE SOME GUY BEGAN TO GIVE US A CRAZY LECTURE. I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT USING THE MYSTERIOUS MONEY FROM BRAZIL TO ESCAPE MY HORRIBLE LIVING SITUATION, BUT I ALSO COULDN'T STOP WORRYING THAT SOMEBODY WAS GOING TO FIND IT.
LET US ALL BOW OUR HEADS AND SUBMIT TO JESUS...

FEARFUL THAT THE MONEY MIGHT SLIP FROM UNDERNEATH MY ARM I TRIED SNEAKING OUT OF THE MEETING.

...ONLY TO BE CAUGHT BY MY DAD AND STEP-MOM IN THE GARAGE.

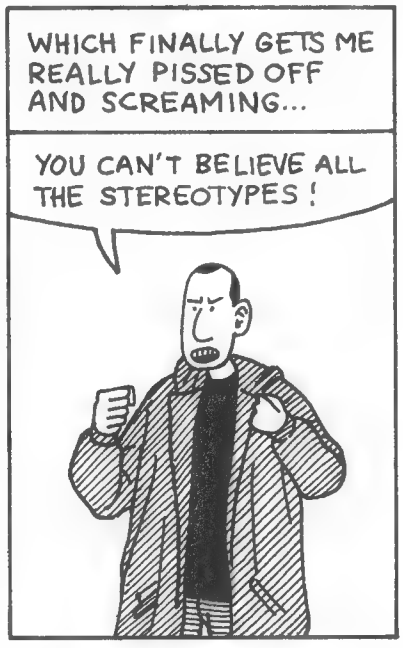
I RAISED MY ARMS AND ALL THE MONEY FELL TO THE GROUND.

I TRY TO STAMMER OUT AN EXPLANATION BUT THEY GROW AFRAID THAT I'M GOING TO TRY TO LEAVE AND BOTH PICK UP BIG PIPES TO BLOCK MY ESCAPE FROM THE GARAGE.

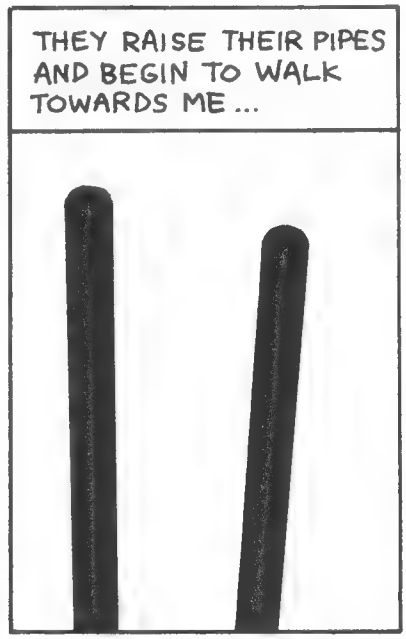


MY STEP-MOM SAYS...

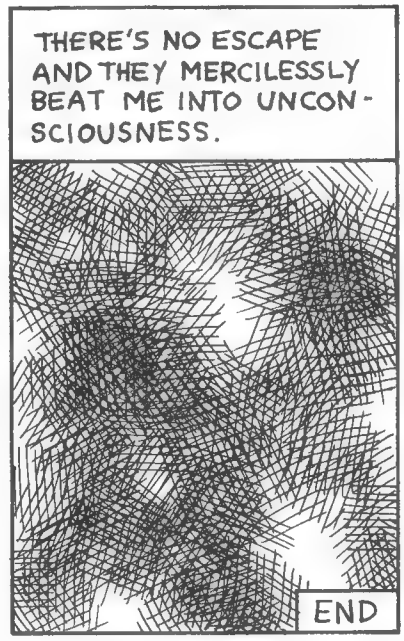
WHICH FINALLY GETS ME REALLY PISSED OFF AND SCREAMING...



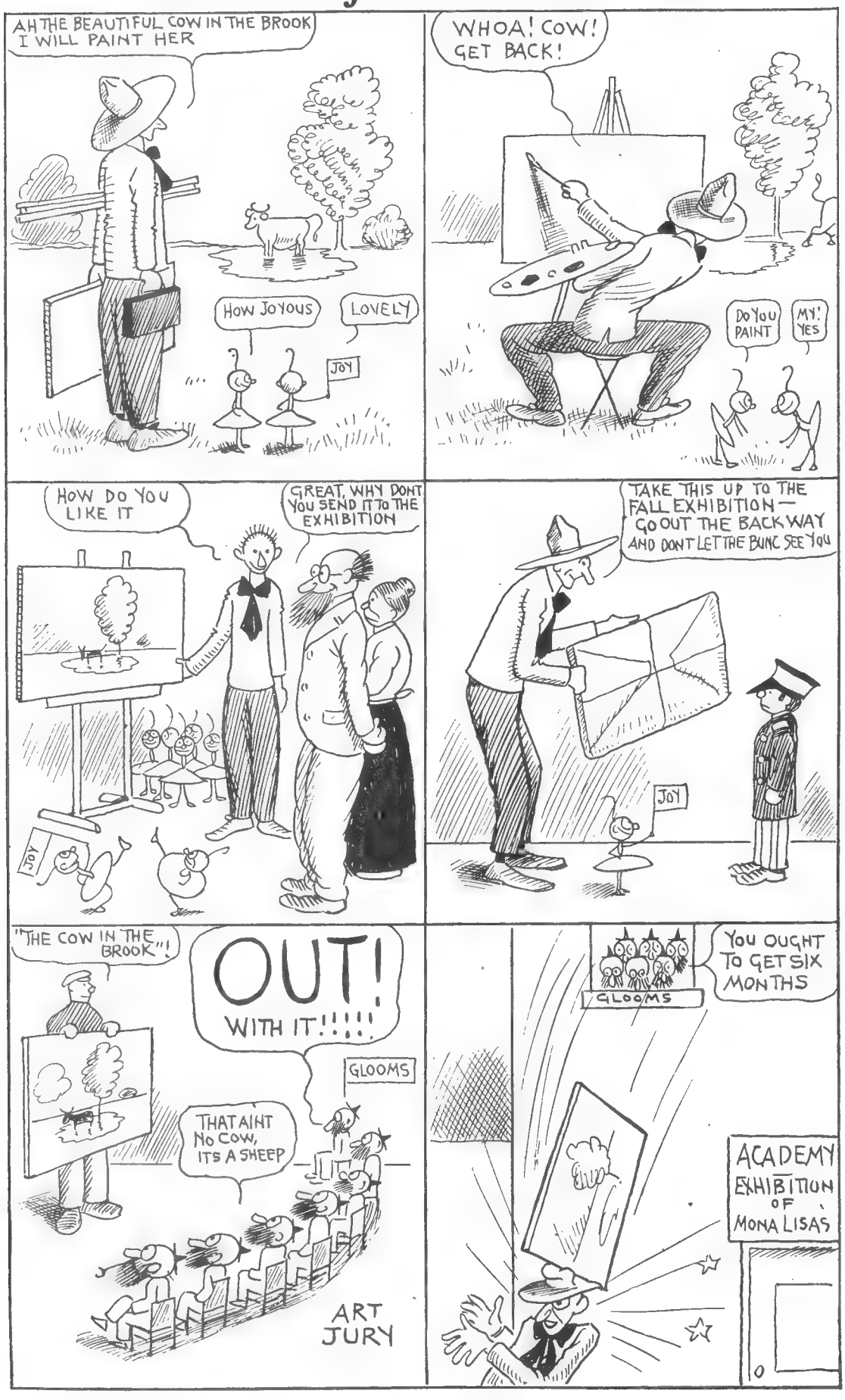
THEY RAISE THEIR PIPES AND BEGIN TO WALK TOWARDS ME...



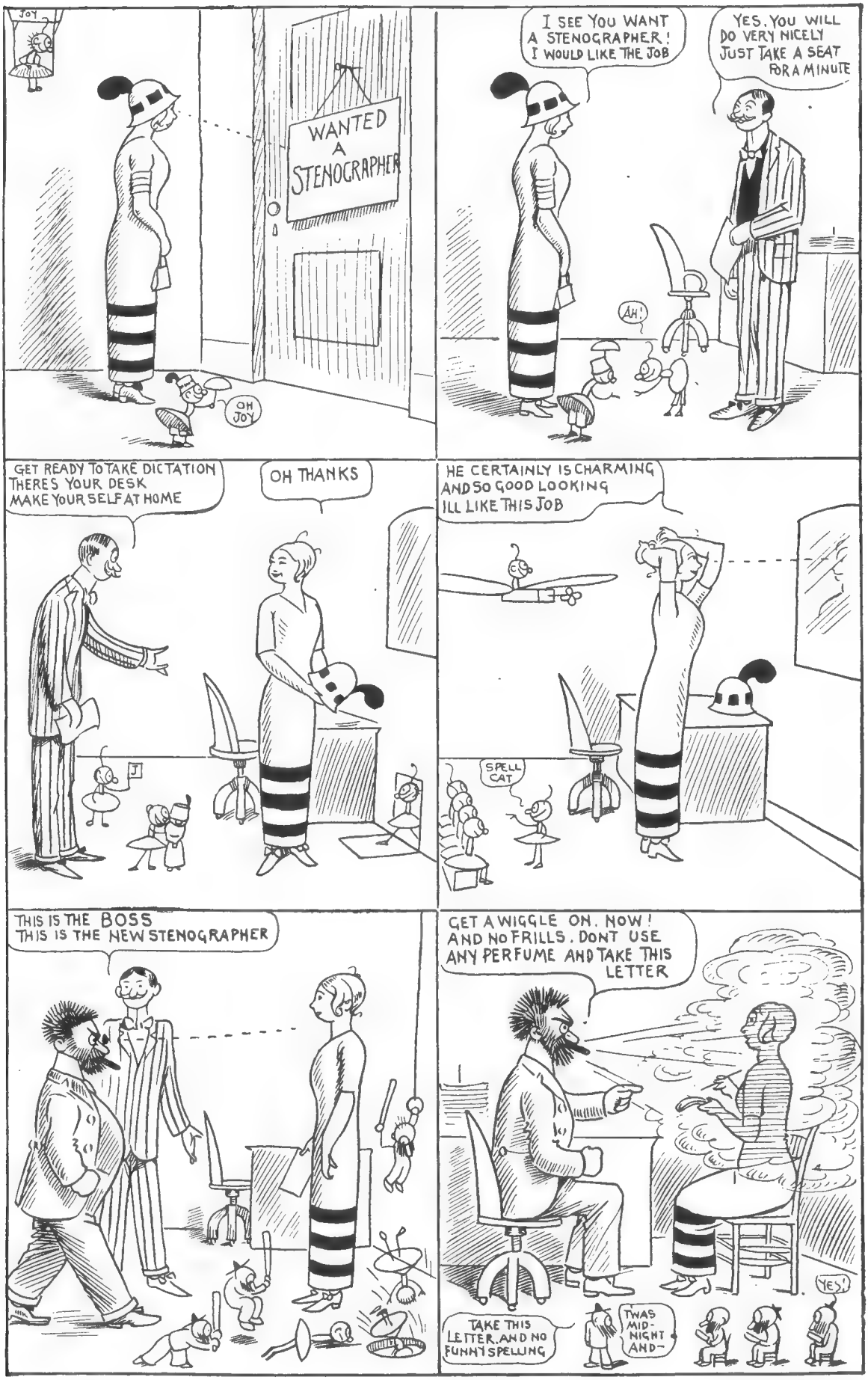
THERE'S NO ESCAPE AND THEY MERCILESSLY BEAT ME INTO UNCONSCIOUSNESS.



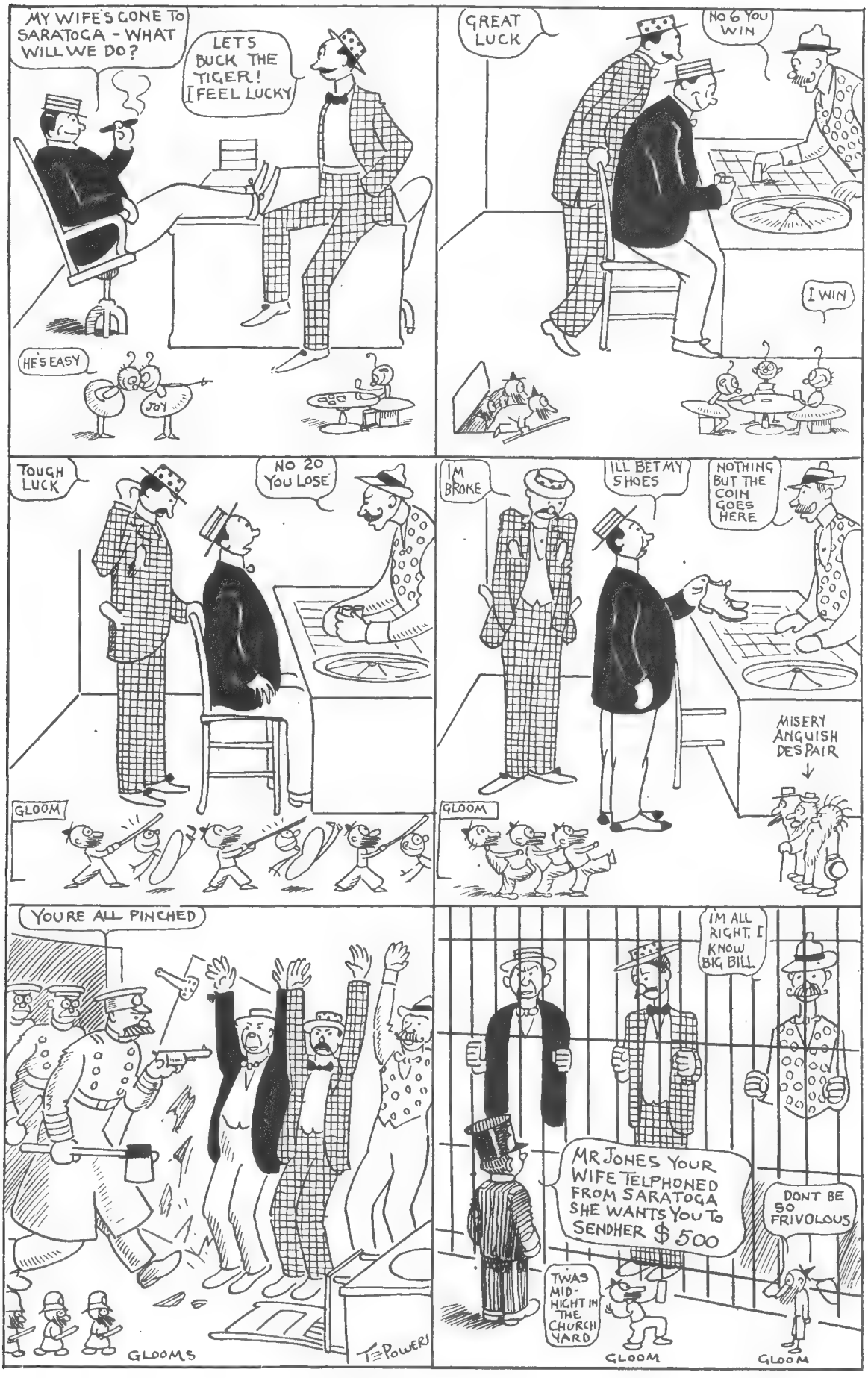
YOU NEVER CAN TELL WHAT A GLOOM JURY WILL DO


AH THE BEAUTIFUL COW IN THE BROOK I WILL PAINT HER
HOW JOYOUS
LOVELY
JOY
WHOA! COW! GET BACK!
DO YOU PAINT
MY! YES
HOW DO YOU LIKE IT
GREAT, WHY DONT YOU SEND IT TO THE EXHIBITION
JOY
TAKE THIS UP TO THE FALL EXHIBITION— GO OUT THE BACK WAY AND DONT LET THE BUNC SEE YOU
JOY
"THE COW IN THE BROOK"!
OUT! WITH IT!!!!!
GLOOMS
THAT AINT NO COW, ITS A SHEEP
ART JURY
GLOOMS
YOU OUGHT TO GET SIX MONTHS
ACADEMY EXHIBITION OF MONA LISAS

SHE WAS HAPPY TILL SHE MET HIM—THE BOSS


JOY
WANTED A STENOGRAPHER
OH JOY
I SEE YOU WANT A STENOGRAPHER! I WOULD LIKE THE JOB
YES. YOU WILL DO VERY NICELY JUST TAKE A SEAT FOR A MINUTE
AH!
GET READY TO TAKE DICTATION THERES YOUR DESK MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME
OH THANKS
HE CERTAINLY IS CHARMING AND SO GOOD LOOKING ILL LIKE THIS JOB
SPELL CAT
THIS IS THE BOSS THIS IS THE NEW STENOGRAPHER
GET A WIGGLE ON. NOW! AND NO FRILLS. DONT USE ANY PERFUME AND TAKE THIS LETTER
YES!
TAKE THIS LETTER. AND NO FUNNY SPELLING
TWAS MID-NIGHT AND-

NOTHING TO DO UNTIL TO-MORROW



an interview with Ben Katchor

conducted by Sirk Productions over the phone on February 26th, 1996

Sirk: I'd like to talk a little about those *Picture Story* magazines you put out...

Katchor: There were only two issues...

Sirk: I've noticed in a lot of your strips sometimes the setting is almost the main character. The story in *Picture Story* #2, *The Printer's Disease* is a good example. You have about 4 or 5 main characters but really the main character, the printer, is just an observer in some ways.

Katchor: Yeah, I try to set up these believable little environments in a strip like that. I sort of remember: there was the printer's storefront and across the street is...

Sirk: The restaurant...

Katchor: Right. The restaurant, and I think on the other corner is this candy factory...

Sirk: Where the printer's girlfriend works...

Katchor: It's a pretty tight little stage set where this can all take place. Because one of the things you can do with a drawing is you can show these spatial relationships. And if you get too diffuse and things flying all over the place, you're really not taking advantage of that power.

Sirk: How do you feel about the different types of media you employ?

Katchor: Well, there are things you can do in comics, I suppose, that you can't do in these other forms, and vice versa. So hopefully you should be doing what you're supposed to be doing in each medium. There are things that you don't...I guess you could draw certain kinds of textures and certain ephemeral light effects, but in a way then you are sort of approaching the power of photography. The picture that would result would be very...well, at least not the kind of picture I would want to make by drawing. Drawing is a more, y'know, shorthand reference to how things look. There are certain limitations, but I guess they're more imposed by my taste. You could draw anything... I suppose. But it wouldn't...

Sirk: Well then, how do feel about that shorthand when you're dealing with sound?

Katchor: You have to actually decide what things sound like...literally, in a concrete way. All sorts of things, all sorts of choices to make. There are things you don't even think about. You sort of think you know what these things sound like...but they're all really your voice, the narrator's voice. It's not that specific.

Sirk: I guess Julius Knipl functions in a similar fashion...as an observer also like the printer in *The Printer's Disease*. Another story I wanted to ask you about...one that I'd never seen before until recently is *Union Square Demonstration*.

Katchor: Yeah, that's an old strip done for a British magazine called *Escape*.

Sirk: It's wonderful. It's only about 6 or 8 pages, and once again the setting plays an integral part of the story.

Katchor: Yeah, that's an unusual strip in that it's set in a place that actually exists. There used to be a lot of bloodbanks just south of Union Square. It's all gone now, but for some reason, I don't know why, Broadway and 4th Avenue had this cluster of bloodbanks. I don't know why there, but that's where they were. Sort of off the street you could walk in and sell your blood.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: Strange.

Sirk: And the story was about a man whose basement was situated on the curve of an otherwise straight subway line. The man spends his time selling his blood, selling his possessions and spending all day in the park. You write: 'The idea that all this public activity revolved around his private life was a grandiose and sad one.' That's beautiful.

Katchor: Yeah...well, I remember that one.

Sirk: (laughs) When I read one of your stories that's six to ten pages in length...I feel you have a little more room to create that believable setting you were talking about. I get the same feeling with the strips, but...the sense of place, the believable setting that comes across in the longer stories...

Katchor: Well hopefully with all the weekly strips, it does that by means of accumulation. I think if you show someone one strip, they might not get it. And some people only understand it when they see it in book form. They read eighty of them in one sitting.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: And some people never get it.

Sirk: Y'know that story *The Printer's Disease*, for me, it was the first story of yours that I had ever read. I had seen your strips here and there, but that story really knocked me on my ass. I felt as if I was given a key of some sort to look at your work in a different way. Then I approached the strips again and they really began to sing.

Katchor: Yeah, I don't know. All I know is that 90% of the people who contact me are not comic readers. They say, "I don't know anything about comics. I don't read comics. I tend to hate comics, but I like your strip.'

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: So, I don't know what it is...I mean as a child I was a comic reader. So I don't know what that is, why that is. I don't know if it doesn't appeal to people who read comics, I just know that it's a demographic fact.

Sirk: I wanted to ask you about that. With the different media you employ, the potentiality of tens of thousands of people picking up the weekly paper on the day it comes out across the country or the radio show, for example...that's such a diverse audience compared to the handful of people who'll pull *Cheap Novelties* off the shelf...whether it's a big chain bookstore or a small comic book shop...

Katchor: I know more people, if you do a weekly comic strip, look at your work than they'll look at drawings of Picasso, just because it's there every week. A week can go by and you don't go to a museum or look at an art book, they sit on the shelf unopened. But a weekly comic strip becomes a part of your life. You just see it every week and if you want to read it...it's the kind of exposure that I think very few other drawing mediums get.

Sirk: I must admit, I clip your strip out every week, but I like

by Ben Katchor

AS THEY HAVE EACH NIGHT AT SEVEN FOR THE PAST THIRTY YEARS,
YOU KNOW, NOEL KAPISH, THE FAMOUS DOUBLE-TALK ARTIST OF THE 1950s AND 60s.
KAPISH
THE DINNER CROWD ARRIVES AT NOEL KAPISH'S RESTAURANT AND SMOKEHAUL HOUNDS.
OH ALL THE BIG TV SHOWS .. YOU MUSTVE SEEN HIM.
HE WAS JUST HERE BUT LEFT FOOTER GERUP OF FRIENDS IN A MERRY KAZUNA. THEY MACKY BLICK TOMATO, BUT I'M NOT SURE.
UNBEKNOWNST TO THEM ALL, THE CELEBRITY-RESTAURATEUR NOW SITS IN A CORRIDOR OF THE DEMENTIA WING OF A PRIVATE NURSING HOME.
I'D PREFER A BAKED POTATO WITH MY PUREED STEAK
BUT HERE, EACH NIGHT AT DINNER TIME, HIS MEMO, HIS DÉCOR AND HIS PERSONALITY ARE KEPT INTACT BY A DEVOTED STAFF.
HE JUST STEPPED LOUT BOTH TWEE TWACK HENNA FINET.
SHOW THIS GENTLEMAN TO THE MINCE LOOM.
IN A WHIRLWIND OF ENFORCED GAIETY AND HEAVY FOOD, THE DYING MEMORIES OF THEIR ONCE-FAMOUS BOSS ARE MOMENTARILY REKINDLED.
-1962-
WAWAZAT?
A CLUB SODA WITH LEMON!
IN THE CLATTER OF DIRTY DISHES, REGULAR CUSTOMERS IMAGINE THEY CAN HEAR HIS FAMILIAR VOICE.
WAWAZAT? WAWAZAT?
ON SLOW, WEEKDAY NIGHTS, THE MAÎTRE D' WORRIES ABOUT THE FUTURE
CAN ONE REALLY BRIBE AN OBITUARY COLUMNIST? AND WHO'LL KEEP TRACK OF ALL THE DETAILS WHEN I RETIRE?
BUT FOR NOW, A FEW EXTRA BULBS IN THE ILLUMINATED OUTDOOR SIGN WILL SUFFICE.
KAPISH
©1995 BEN KATCHOR

to include the ads and announcements that surround it.

Katchor: I have that dilemma. I used to save my printed strips, but I would save the whole paper because I thought this would be of no interest of me to look back at just the clipped strip. I wanted to see the context it was in that year, that month, in some city. And then it became completely out of hand.

Sirk: (laughs) I can imagine.

Katchor: At this point I no longer save them...

Sirk: No?

Katchor: I can't. I have this enormous pile of newspapers.

Sirk: The numbers have gotten up there, you must be in the thousands now.

Katchor: Oh no, there are only about four hundred.

Sirk: Sorry, I'm off my rocker. When the strips are freshly printed the tones are really dark...then they yellow and age, and the tones become a little more subdued and the strip takes on a different feel when looking at them as yellow and brittle pieces of paper. I have one from '93, *The In Eradicator*.

Katchor: There's a radio version of that strip.

Sirk: That would make sense. It would translate well...

Katchor: Yeah, it's hard to know which ones would work.

Sirk: Well, one of the strips that sums up your work, for me anyhow, is the #35 in *Cheap Novelties* which begins: 'A phone booth's location exerts a subtle influence on the person using it.' That's sheer poetry! Your writing stands on its own so well...I have to ask you if you've written any prose or poetry...

Katchor: Well not too much. I write in a way that works with pictures. I don't know if it would stand up without the pictures. I think you're seeing it alongside this world that's evoked by the pictures.

Sirk: It's not just that it could stand alone, but that the wording is such that I don't see it anywhere else in comics. Chris Ware told me that he wishes he could match the density of your wording...

Katchor: Well, I only have to write a few sentences. Since I only have to write that much every week, I can put a lot of time into it. The radio has pretty much reduced it to words and sound effects, but I think the words then take on more weight than in a comic strip, because you're only hearing this narrator's voice.

Sirk: Right.

Katchor: I think they work, but they (the producers) went with the more humorous part of the strip, which is...you know, definitely there. It holds together. And I have to write a lot more dialogue because there are always things going on in the background that have to be filled out. In a comic strip you can have someone saying a fragment of a sentence. But when you actually have this put into the mix, you have to include what comes before it and what comes after it. Maybe that one moment will be focused, put into auditory focus, but you have to write up to it and write out of it. I write ten times as much dialogue. You don't always hear it, and a lot of it doesn't end up being used, but I remember really filling out long stretches of dialogue.

Sirk: Are you still working on those right now?

Katchor: They are just about to end the ones that have been taped. There's another batch in the works.

Sirk: So how many are there?

Katchor: So far there are fourteen episodes.

Sirk: Really? The ad said it would run for fifty-two weeks. Do they play the same ones over again?

Katchor: They run once a month, so it's hard to catch.

Sirk: The one time I was able to find it, my radio died as soon as it began!

Wednesday,
Fresh Blood "Th
lecture by auth
Affairs Center,
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Michael Ondaat
novelist/poet,
Herbst Theatr
392-4400.
Outlook Gay/bi
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Drawing," led
Gorovoy 7:30

THE PRINTER'S DISEASE
BUS TRIP
I WANT TO COVER UP THE ORIGINAL LABELS WITH THE NAME OF MY COMPANY. YOU GET IT?
SOMETHING LIKE THIS, ONLY I WANT YOU TO DRESS IT UP A LITTLE.
GOUPEL BROTHERS
100% PURE
I HAVE TO SEND OUT FOR THE ARTWORK ON SOMETHING LIKE THIS. YOU'LL HAVE TO GIVE ME A COUPLE...
GOOD.
IRIN CANDY Co

© 1986 Ben Katchor

Katchor: (laughs) Once in a while they play them on this show, The Best of NPR. But it's a short segment, so it's easily missed.

Sirk: Do you think there ever will be a collection of those?

Katchor: Oh yeah, I think they would definitely have to be heard over again. They go by much too fast to really get them. There just aren't enough yet...another half hour of material is needed before there can be a collection.

Sirk: I wanted to ask you some miscellaneous things. Is it true that you did a Yiddish strip?

Katchor: No. I once did a strip in the *Forward* for a year called *The Jew of New York.*

Sirk: Oh, really?

Katchor: But in English...it's not a Yiddish strip. It's a fifty-two week story. I'm in the English edition of the *Forward*. There still is a Yiddish edition.

Sirk: Those strips wouldn't see the light of day, would they?

Katchor: Well, maybe. It was a historical epic set in the 1830's, in New York City. Pretty elaborate.

Sirk: Did you do a lot of research?

Katchor: More for atmosphere than historical facts. I looked at a lot of period imagery: paintings, posters and newspapers.

Sirk: I know this might sound like a strange analogy, but your strips remind me sometimes of (Vladimir) Nabokov.

Katchor: He's one of my favorite writers...definitely a great influence.

Sirk: It's the images that are evoked...

Katchor: ...as much as it is the 'city' of imagery, that kind of imagery...some of his stories do take place in cities like Berlin. His writing has a wonderfully rich texture, with images, sounds and words in perfect poetic tune.

Sirk: The word 'lyrical' comes to mind.

Katchor: There's a point in one of his novels, and I forget which one it is...where a man plans his own murder. What novel is that? But the narrator is describing someone who...he's discovered someone sleeping on the grass and he realizes that this man is an exact double, a physical double of himself. And the narrator says that there are these moments in prose when you wish you could just have a picture that would explain the situation better. I think, well, I know he drew mainly just for scientific illustration, but he could draw, and maybe if things had worked out differently he would have left some kind of picture things behind. But he didn't. I know he did an elaborate screenplay for the Lolita film.

Sirk: The one with Peter Sellers?

Katchor: I don't know how much of it was used. I think it was all re-written.

Sirk: What about non-urban settings? Some of the strips from late '95 that are running now take place outside the city.

Katchor: I'm curious about smaller towns. I've spent time in a smaller city, and I've spent some time upstate (New York). The city is a strange magnet for everyone outside of it and that's what I usually talk about.

Sirk: I don't necessarily see your work in just an urban setting.

Katchor: I've done strips that take place on the periphery of the city. But, I've always lived in a city and that's usually what I tend to talk about.

Sirk: Did you grow up there?

Katchor: Yeah, in Brooklyn. So it's more or less what I know. I've done strips set in other locales, but they would always have to have something to do with what I know.

Sirk: Oh, of course, and I get that from your strip. It's one of the only real depictions of New York. People have some crazy ideas of what New York is like...but the New York that you depict is one I think that actually exists.

Katchor: I have a strip now in this magazine that's in it's start-up stage called *Virtual City*. It's a magazine about the Internet and

JULIUS KNIPL
REAL ESTATE PHOTOGRAPHER
THERE'S A LITTLE HAND, REACHING DOWN BEHIND YOU,
BY WHAT SUBTLE FORM OF INCULCATION
IN THE DARKEST NIGHT, WHERE THERE IS NO LIGHT.
NO SMOKING
DO THE WORDS AND MELODY OF A POPULAR SONG
PUT 'ER THERE MY FRIEND, PUT 'ER THERE OLD STRANGER
ENTER THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND OF A BUSY MAN.
LITTLE HAND FROM NOWHERE, LITTLE HAND OF TIME.
A T.V. VARIETY SHOW HEARD THROUGH A WALL.
AND THIS LITTE HAND, REACHING DOWN BEHIND YOU,
FROM THE RADIO OF A PASSING CAR
SCRATCHES WHERE IT ITCHES, IN THE DARK OF NIGHT.
THROUGH SUCH EFFORTLESS ASSIMILATION, A BUSY MAN MAY NOT EVEN REALIZE WHAT IT IS THAT HE'S LEARNT
PUT 'ER THERE MY FRIEND, PUT 'ER THERE OLD STRANGER
QUIET.
FROM AN OPEN WINDOW AT DUSK.
LITTLE HAND FROM NOWHERE, LITTLE HAND OF TIME.

the Web. It's pretty visible, because it's partly published by Newsweek...so it gets on every stand on every supermarket counter.

Sirk: How did you get that gig?

Katchor: I don't know. Someone wanted a strip, I guess by someone who would have an odd view of this new technology. It's supposed to be the urban magazine of cyberspace and they wanted some urban imagery in it, I suppose.

Sirk: How do you feel about it? How many have you done?

Katchor: Just two. I'm about to do a third. It's interesting.

Sirk: What's the subject matter?

Katchor: It's called "An Address on Nohitol Street," and it shows people drowning in too much information and not being able to find their way around, or the limitations of the access to a lot of information, what happens to people.

Sirk: Well, I have some other questions I'd like to ask. I was talking to Chris Ware yesterday to get ready for this interview, and he had some interesting things to say...or at least was able to articulate himself better than I could about your work...

Katchor: Where is he now?

Sirk: He's in Chicago. He felt that in your work you offer a lot of different readings, a lot of different levels.

Katchor: Yeah...

Sirk: He also said he thought it was a modern tragedy.

Katchor: .....

Sirk: Silence! (laughs)

Katchor: Well, yeah. Always I like to have both comedy and tragedy in my strips. And the sort of thin line dividing them should always be apparent.

Sirk: Does it bother you that some people like the humorous angle too much?

Katchor: No. They're both there.

Sirk: I only ask this because *Cheap Novelties* is in the humor section in the bookstores.

Katchor: Well, that's where they put the comics. But no, there's clearly a humorous angle to it. It's just fairly dark humor.

Sirk: Where you involved in printing at one time?

Katchor: I used to have a typesetting business. It was all computer typesetting, all pre-press...nothing to do with actual printing.

Sirk: When did you stop the business?

Katchor: I don't know.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: Quite a while ago. Eight years ago, maybe more.

Sirk: I just noticed there are a lot of references to printed matter in your work.

Katchor: The city is cluttered with print. So I guess I'm aware of the details of printing.

Sirk: Well, it's fascinating to think that some of the clutter could be, or is, the papers with your strips in them.

Katchor: I'm going to be in San Francisco at the end of March. I'm going to speak at an urban design symposium entitled: *Cities in the Making*, at the California College of Arts and Crafts.

Sirk: Did they just call you up?

Katchor: I guess they wanted someone who's not a professional designer, but who deals with cities in another way.

Sirk: Have you thought about what you might say?

Katchor: I'm not going to talk about urban planning. I'm going to talk about how I do my strip and what interests me, and what it's like doing a strip about a city.

Sirk: It would be funny to have you talk about urban planning and them talk about comics.

Katchor: No, there will be academic and professional people talking about the urban design part.

Sirk: I'd like to ask you a little about your process, if you wouldn't mind. Sometimes I have the idea when I read a strip that it's so effortless and so casual that it might be first take.

Katchor: I write them first. Well, I guess there are early ones that were written pretty effortlessly, and I draw directly in ink, so...

Sirk: I thought that.

Katchor: They shouldn't look too labored...they should look as quickly done as possible.

Sirk: That's what I mean...they're so conversational.

Katchor: Well, I spend a lot of time with the writing, since I draw directly, you're only seeing the last layer of ink. You're not seeing things I whited out. The final layer that you see only took probably a few minutes to draw. When I started running larger in the (Village) Voice, the strip became a little more dense. And that's the only difference, I think. The drawing became more, I just began to put more things in...but, I don't know, I don't know where the strip is going, but it's still going.

Sirk: I must say that I'm enjoying the way the strips, it's going, it's getting...it's kind of growing exponentially.

Katchor: (laughs)

Sirk: Sometimes Mr. Knipl will drop out of the strip. Or he'll be such a casual observer. One of the recent ones I remember was the Kapish Restaurant.

Katchor: Yeah, that's also a radio show, "The Double-Talk Artist."

Sirk: Do you find yourself writing for the radio show...meaning, you're drawing a strip and thinking...

Katchor: Thinking that it'll be used for...

Sirk: The radio?

Katchor: No, I just try and get a decent strip out and some of them work on radio. Work meaning, they are possible to translate...others are not. No, if I thought too much about that I'd go mad.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: I just think of getting the strip done.

Sirk: Right. Do you have any thoughts about doing a long story?

Katchor: Well, there's a long story at the end of *Cheap Novelties*.

Sirk: Sure, I know. But a long story not necessarily of Mr. Knipl?

Katchor: Oh, other than? ...I don't know if that's the best for me.

Sirk: Really? Because when I read that *Picture Story*...

Katchor: The long story?

Sirk: It was 23 or 25 pages and...

Katchor: I don't know if people have the patience to read those stories. I think they can barely get through eight panels.

Sirk: Oh, you're...crazy.

Katchor: I don't want to...I mean I'm aware of making this accessible.

Sirk: Would you consider doing it, if someone approached you and said...

Katchor: I can do it anytime. I mean, I'm working on another story, the length of one in *Cheap Novelties*, for the next collection.

Sirk: Of Julius Knipl strips?

Katchor: Yeah, the long story is a Knipl story. But...I don't know if that's really the power of the form. People sort of take it in bite size pieces and when you get longer strips, I think it's just overwhelming.

Sirk: No, I totally understand what you're saying.

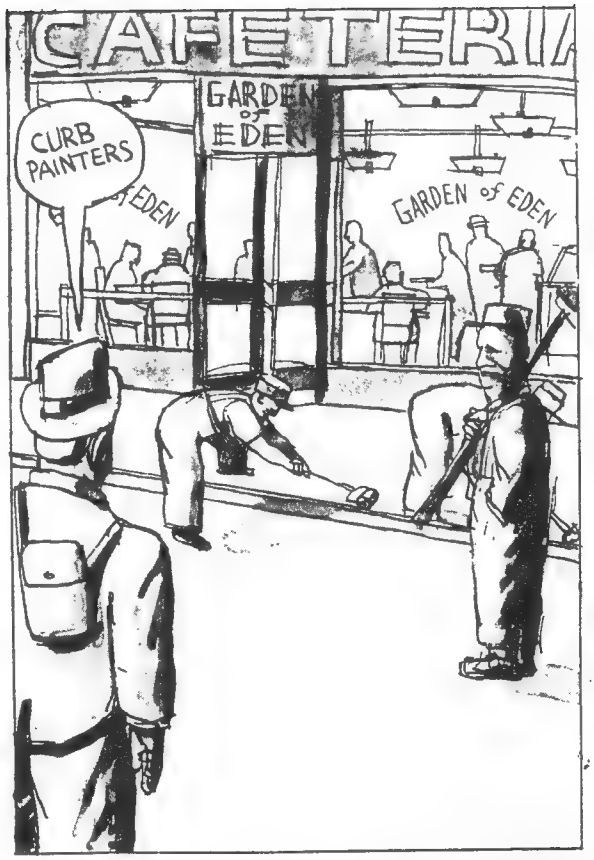
Katchor: For readers.

Sirk: Sure, sure.

Katchor: It's like making a five hour movie, you can do it and it can be a successful movie, but no one will want to sit through it. So it builds in other ways. A weekly strip builds over time. It doesn't build as a...

Sirk: I feel like in some sense the strip is one long narrative...

Katchor: Yeah, that thing I did, *The Jew of New York*, is 52 pages long. But each one can be read as a weekly story. And you could almost read them independently of each other in a strange way. They always had a little beginning and end each week. So it's definitely something to consider, what the reader can endure, and what the form is. I mean, it's a pretty dense form. It's not like a hundred page novel...a hundred page novel is not like a hundred page comic strip. There's a certain power, you can set up a lot in a few panels. Not just the page count, but in content as well.



Sirk: So how do you feel about *Cheap Novelties* as...

Katchor: Well, it's a collection...you can read it a page at a time and put it down. People who like to read comics, who are obsessed with actual form, can plow through a hundred page comic novel. But I don't know if that's the ideal form for comics. I just know what people read and what people can assimilate and respond to...so I'm pretty conscious of that. Whether there is a place for these things to appear and how people can take them in.

Sirk: Right. I think a lot of people doing comics nowadays are wondering just that.

Katchor: There are other ways to lure people into your strip world...these weekly strips seem fairly painless to people. If a strip of that density went on for two pages...they'd be lost. I think that's all part of the medium. How much your audience can take in.

Sirk: How do you feel about the other strips in the weeklies?

Katchor: I don't see too many of them because I don't get a lot of these papers. I knew people who were doing strips when I started and a lot of them are not doing them anymore.

Sirk: Do you see the weeklies being more receptive nowadays to something other than a gag strip?

Katchor: I think there's very little market for strips because most papers only need one or two. Or they don't run any strips. And if they have one or two, they don't need any other's. So it's a pretty small market...really about a few dozen papers. There are easier strips than mine to read. I'm in the papers I'm in because the editor was a fan and he had to have it. And he didn't care about getting anything else.

Sirk: When I see your strip in a paper, I have a little more hope that...

Katchor: The editor of the paper in San Francisco was the editor of a paper in Washington D.C. and he picked it up because he was a fan of it, and when he moved to this paper, he took it with him. I mean, that's what it really boils down to.

Sirk: And then they see a collection in a bookstore and buy it because they know of it, are familiar...

Katchor: It may not seem like the most accessible comic strip a paper could pick to run, but if it's there, people will tend to read it.

Sirk: Well, like I said, it gives me hope that maybe someday there'd be other strips like it in the same papers.

Katchor: I think it has a lot to do with the whole balance of a paper. They need one or two strips and that's it. The problem with these all comic papers is that they don't have enough good material, and most people are not obsessed with comics.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: There's a small audience of people who are. Other people want it as...it's a very peripheral thing in their lives. If they see one that they like that's enough for them. I mean, I tried to publish a comic magazine, and I realized that it's probably not the way to get people to read comics. It's better implanted in other kinds of magazines. People will read it because it's in another context that they like. Y'know, people who are interested in the World Wide Web will come across my strip in *Virtual City* magazine and read it, but never look at *Cheap Novelties* in a bookstore.

Sirk: How do you feel about strips on the Internet?

Katchor: I know there are strips on the Internet...but the closest my strip is to being on there is on the Forward Web site. They do a little teaser each week. They run a panel, and there'll be something connected to the NPR Web site where they have real audio, so you can download the actual radio episode...and I have to do something for that. It seems like a good idea to have strips on the Web. You don't have to warehouse all that paper.

Sirk: (laughs) Personally, it bother me...I don't like the idea that...

Katchor: What? That it's not on paper?

Sirk: Yeah.

Katchor: Yeah, I can't believe that there's an audience that would accept such an intangible medium. But then movies and TV are all just...

Sirk: Dots on a screen.

Katchor: Just pixels, dots and bits of light, so y'know, I could see...I mean, I knew a lot of these weeklies who used to depend on the low price of newsprint are now in trouble because the price has quadrupled or something. They've all probably tried to figure it out, I'm sure, how to set up some part of their paper on an on-line service. Y'know, when these things are in everyone's home...it'll probably be a viable medium.

Sirk: I look forward to the day when you could print out...

Katchor: A good hard copy...

Sirk: Yeah.

Katchor: The thing is...on a very good monitor, a good scan of my strip looks better than it does in any newspaper. It looks like this perfect transparency of the artwork, a perfect slide of the artwork.

Sirk: That makes me feel a little differently about it, because I've never seen it done well.

Katchor: It depends on the viewer's monitor.

Sirk: Well, I've also never heard the artists say they like it. Generally the artists I've talked to who've seen their work on the monitor don't like it.

Katchor: It is relative. It's all dependent on the end user's monitor. What these things look like. But on a very good monitor it looks like a backlit slide of the artwork. Pretty amazing, but hard on the eyes staring at a monitor.

Sirk: So there's the possibility and potential you could have a daily or weekly strip transmitted to you...

Katchor: That exists now. News services with daily strips one can subscribe to.

Sirk: Good grief.

Katchor: It's all there. 99% of it is like everything else in the culture is...garbage, but it's just a medium, some good things will be on it, that's all. Spending hours looking around on this thing...you sort of hit these little nooks and crannies of people who have things that are of interest. But it's a tiny portion of it. But that's how you find things in the real world. On TV or in the movies, you have to find it...most of it is just advertising.

Sirk: I think that's what my fear is, that like TV, it'll just be an advertising medium.

Katchor: Well, like TV it'll have sponsors. But y'know, somebody sponsors these newspapers I'm in. A lot of the advertisers are indirectly paying my salary. So it's all advertising driven anyway.

Sirk: Well, it's part of the culture, like you said.

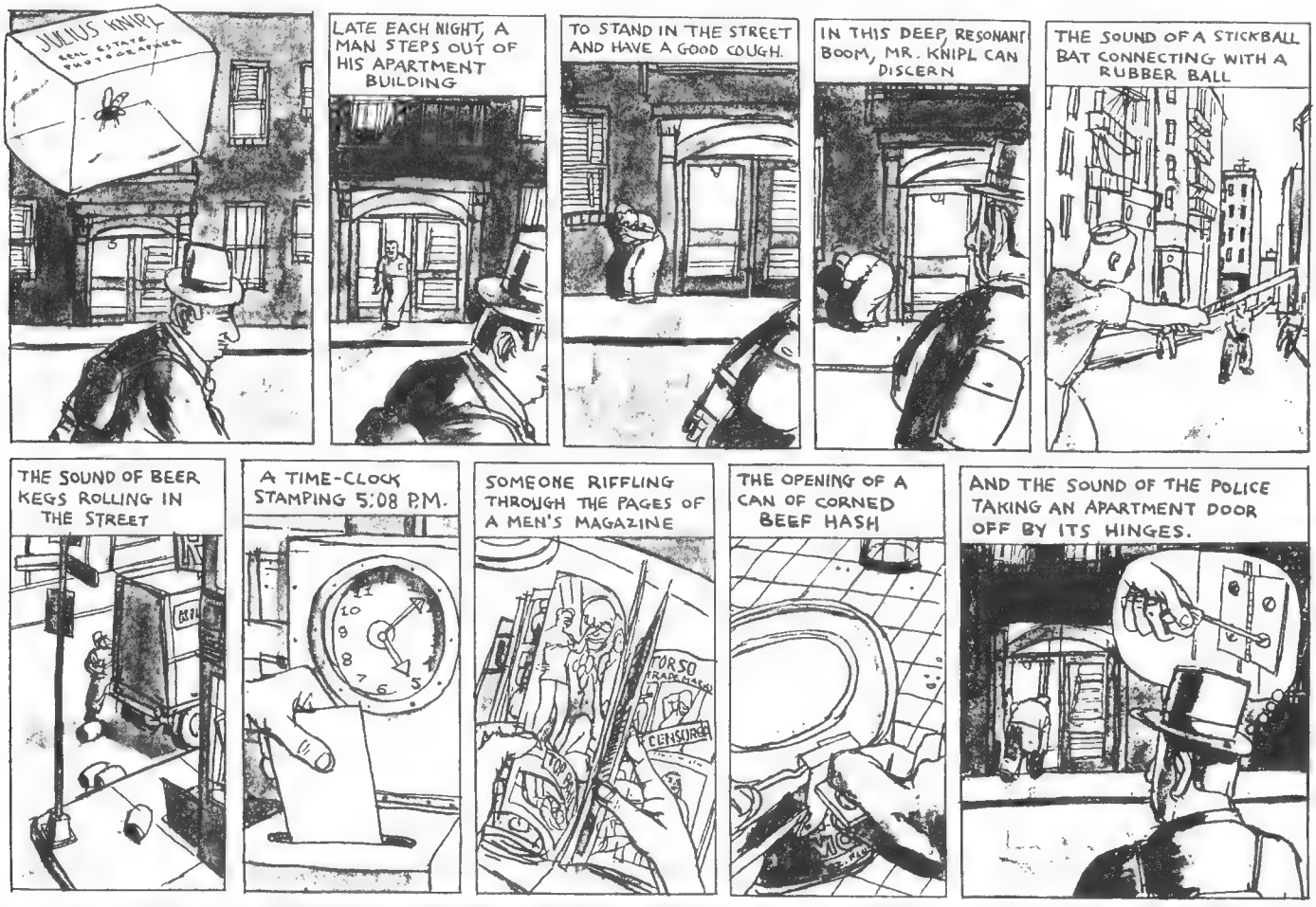
Katchor: On the web, at the moment, you don't have to deal with these distributors of print. Which is not a very pleasant experience. The idea that it's a direct conduit from one person's scanner to someone else's monitor is not a bad idea. I mean, the paper thing is gone...there could always be a paper version of it, a collection, a book, if you want to hold it in your hand. It's definitely a different experience. Y'know, it's been around for years...scientists and research people have used it for years, it's old hat to them. It's all just so hyped now as a consumer thing.

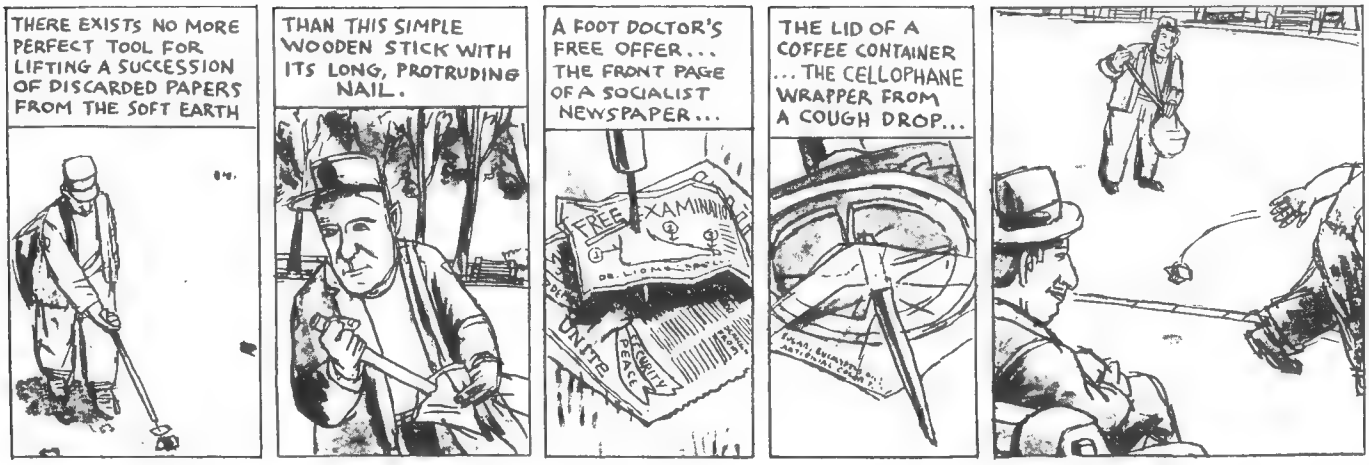
Sirk: Right.

Katchor: So I mean, it really worked as a medium of distribution of information. It does work. The thing is, who's gonna pay for it, who's gonna be on it.

Sirk: Everyone's a star.

Katchor: Yeah, that's strange. Those personal home web pages...but we grew up with fanzines. Comic fanzines were not much different. Although there was always more to them. These


JULIUS KNIPL
REAL ESTATE PHOTOGRAPHER
LATE EACH NIGHT, A MAN STEPS OUT OF HIS APARTMENT BUILDING
TO STAND IN THE STREET AND HAVE A GOOD COUGH.
IN THIS DEEP, RESONANT BOOM, MR. KNIPL CAN DISCERN
THE SOUND OF A STICKBALL BAT CONNECTING WITH A RUBBER BALL
THE SOUND OF BEER KEGS ROLLING IN THE STREET
A TIME-CLOCK STAMPING 5:08 P.M.
SOMEONE RIFFLING THROUGH THE PAGES OF A MEN'S MAGAZINE
THE OPENING OF A CAN OF CORNED BEEF HASH
AND THE SOUND OF THE POLICE TAKING AN APARTMENT DOOR OFF BY ITS HINGES.
TORSO
CENSORED


THERE EXISTS NO MORE PERFECT TOOL FOR LIFTING A SUCCESSION OF DISCARDED PAPERS FROM THE SOFT EARTH
THAN THIS SIMPLE WOODEN STICK WITH ITS LONG, PROTRUDING NAIL.
A FOOT DOCTOR'S FREE OFFER... THE FRONT PAGE OF A SOCIALIST NEWSPAPER...
FREE EXAMINATION
THE LID OF A COFFEE CONTAINER ... THE CELLOPHANE WRAPPER FROM A COUGH DROP...

(web pages) are pretty thin in terms of content.

Sirk: (laughs)

Katchor: I just don't think most people want to be publishers and most people don't want to do this. People will get sick of it, and people who like it will go into web publishing and hopefully do something good. Y'know, these things have been around. Fanzines have been around. Hopefully it'll all shake down to something useable.

Sirk: It would definitely help distribution.

Katchor: It's no solution. It's still much to slow. It's in it's technological infancy. The key to it, is what we can use.

Sirk: Oh well, in any case...I have some other silly questions but they seem kind of meaningless at this point. They have to do with influences. For some reason I think you might have read or been influenced by Steve Ditko's work.

Katchor: Oh yeah, He was...probably as a kid, my favorite.

Sirk: It's something I couldn't describe...

Katchor: Well, how to build figure, how to conceptualize figures, a great sense of place in each panel, a unique style.

Sirk: Okay...well, is there anything you'd like to add or address?

Katchor: No, It's all in the strips.

Sirk: Well thank you. I hope this wasn't too...

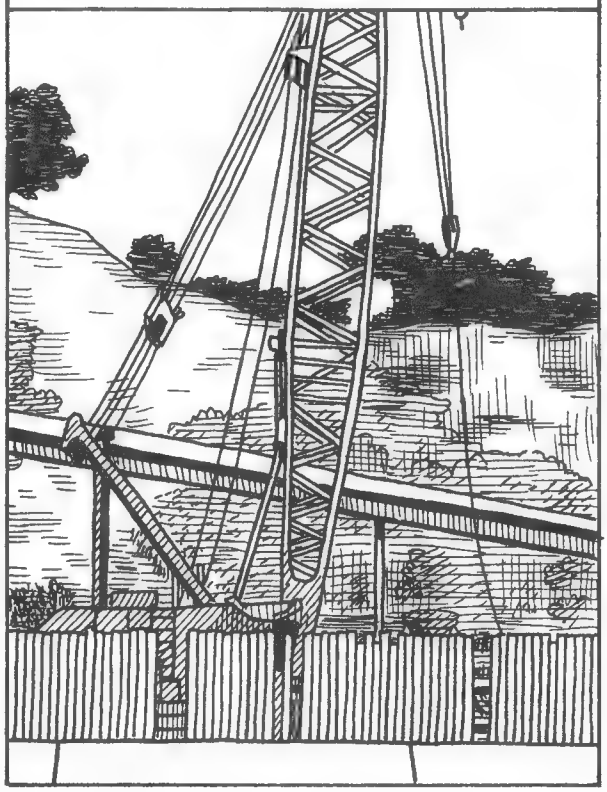
Katchor: Very painless, no...

ESHC
EMJ
YOU CAN NEVER GET THE LAST NAIL IN...
FILTHY HABITS
BY WALKER, JONES & CRADE
28 PAGES, BLACK & WHITE
WITH A FULL-COLOR COVER
QUARTERLY FROM Aeon
COMING IN JULY TO YOUR LOCAL COMICS SHOP!

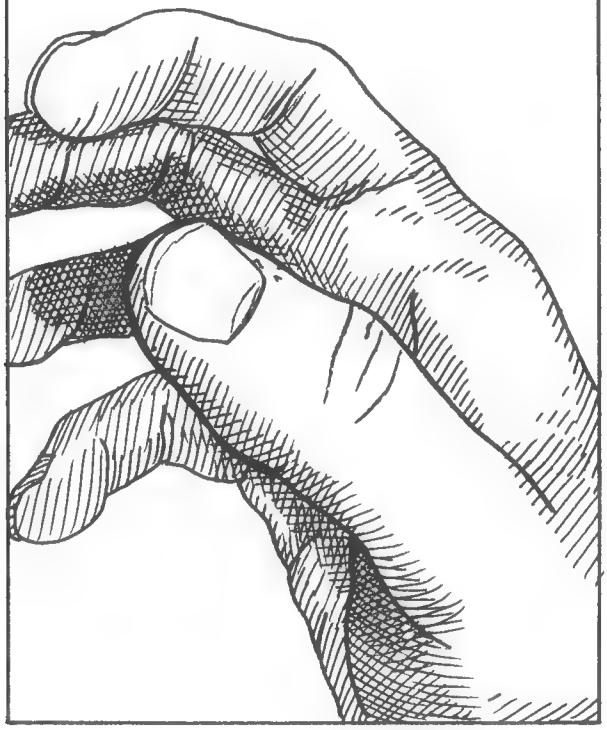
RESEDA

WERE YOU THE ONE WHO RAN OVER MY CAT AND JUST KEPT ON DRIVING?

I DIDN'T CRY THAT DAY, BUT TODAY I AM.



YOU'RE PROBABLY LAUGHING AT ME, BUT I REALLY DON'T CARE.

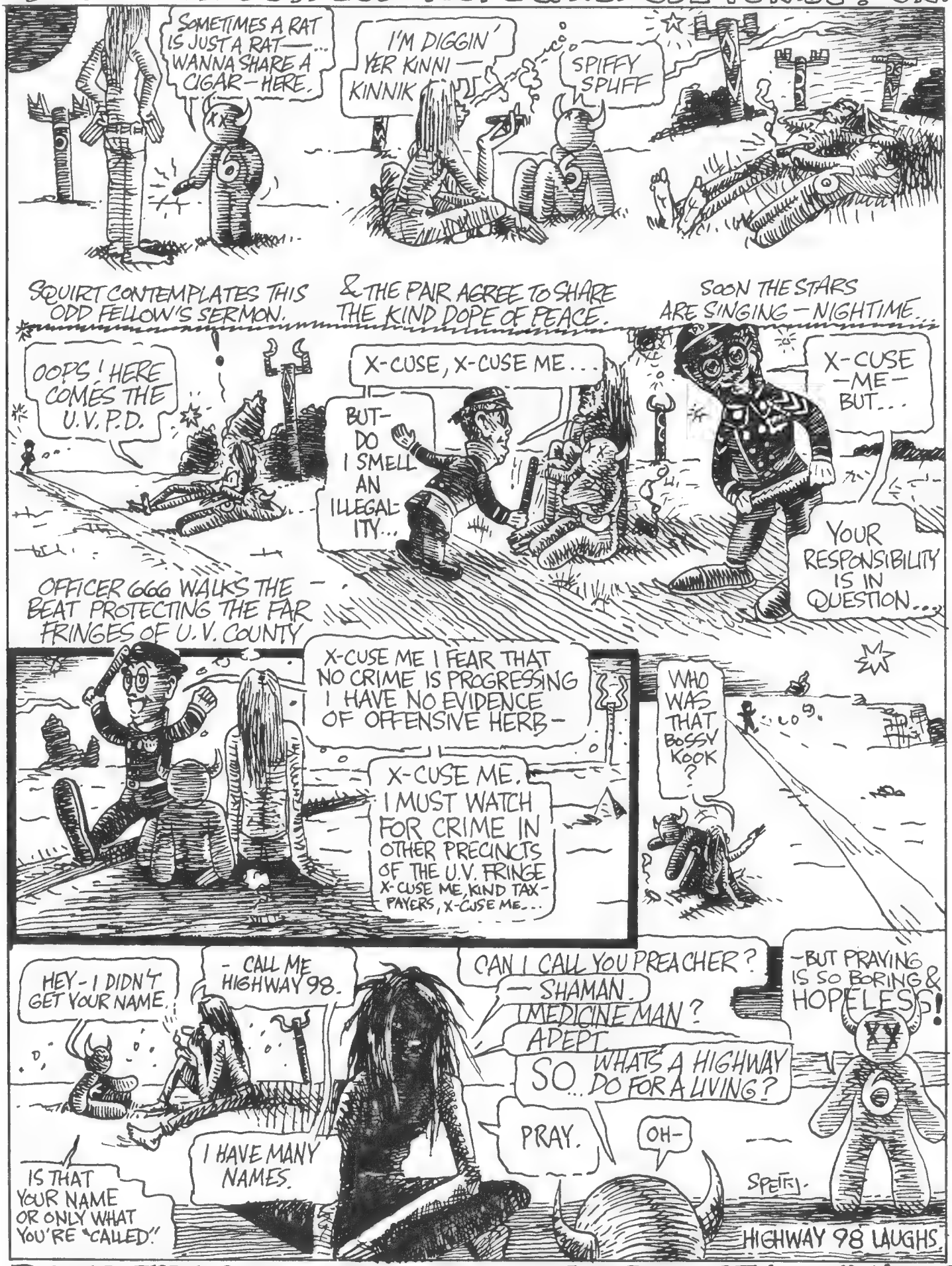


I'VE CHANGED A LOT OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS.

Lil SQUIRT
"when I was little I wanted to fly."
THOUGHT SQUIRT LYING IN THE SHADE OF THE ANCIENT TOTEM IN U.V. WOOD...
...IN THE LATE AUTUMN DUSK
THEN HE SAW AN EAGLE FLYING BETWEEN THE SUN & THE MOON...
I WISH I WERE YOU, SIR.
SQUIRT PRAYED.
OH!
SQUIRT SAW THAT HE HELD A RAT TO EAT.
THE PREY FLAILED.
RAT BIT EAGLE
& FELL.
NOW HE WAS IN TROUBLE.

ODD FELLOW.....
1
PECULIAR IMAGERY...
RAT FLY TOO.
-THUMP-
A PAIR OF HANDS APPEARED.
2
OH·NICE CATCH!
-BYE!-
3
This RAT PRAY TO BE A RAT..?
To L.I.F.E.
4
NO PRAYING
& HE FLYS.
HA
5
THE WAY OF RAT IS THE WAY OF NEVER HUNTING, NOR PLANTING, NOR KNOWING SELF.
NEVER THANK-ING HIS MAKER- RAT SWIMS A RIVER THAT FLOWS IN CIRCLE
6 IF YOU ARE TO SURVIVE YOU PRAY! IT IS EARTH WHO FLIES HOME TO FEED YOU TO ITS KIN LIKE EAGLE. ONLY THE MAKER SAVES YOU FOR YOUR PRAYERS.

...DOES THE SUN LOSE HOPE & REFUSE TO RISE? OR...


SOMETIMES A RAT IS JUST A RAT—... WANNA SHARE A CIGAR—HERE.
I'M DIGGIN' YER KINNI—KINNIK
SPIFFY SPLIFF
SQUIRT CONTEMPLATES THIS ODD FELLOW'S SERMON.
& THE PAIR AGREE TO SHARE THE KIND DOPE OF PEACE.
SOON THE STARS ARE SINGING—NIGHTIME...
OOPS! HERE COMES THE U.V.P.D.
X-CUSE, X-CUSE ME...
BUT—DO I SMELL AN ILLEGAL-ITY...
X-CUSE—ME—BUT...
YOUR RESPONSIBILITY IS IN QUESTION...
OFFICER 666 WALKS THE BEAT PROTECTING THE FAR FRINGES OF U.V. COUNTY
X-CUSE ME I FEAR THAT NO CRIME IS PROGRESSING I HAVE NO EVIDENCE OF OFFENSIVE HERB—
X-CUSE ME. I MUST WATCH FOR CRIME IN OTHER PRECINCTS OF THE U.V. FRINGE X-CUSE ME, KIND TAX-PAYERS, X-CUSE ME...
WHO WAS THAT BOSSY KOOK?
HEY—I DIDN'T GET YOUR NAME.
—CALL ME HIGHWAY 98.
CAN I CALL YOU PREACHER?
—SHAMAN.
MEDICINE MAN?
ADEPT.
SO... WHAT'S A HIGHWAY DO FOR A LIVING?
—BUT PRAYING IS SO BORING & HOPELESS!
I HAVE MANY NAMES.
PRAY.
OH—
IS THAT YOUR NAME OR ONLY WHAT YOU'RE "CALLED"
SPEED.
HIGHWAY 98 LAUGHS.

...DOES THE GROUND BECOME BORED OF LOOKING UP.

FOLLOW ME. I'LL SHOW YOU. HOW TO PRAY.
OH, HERE WE GO-A-NOTHER NUT.
—ONE—
TRIP!
BONK
—TWO—
WOW! ITSA GOOD THING I ALREADY HAVE "X"s FOR EYES!
OWEE! THAT KILLED!
—THREE—
HURRY
!?
—FOUR—
DOWN HERE..
—SIX—
SOON...
CREEK
—FIVE—
K-K-K
GOTTA REMEMBER — NO MORE SHAMANS
COOLNESS! GRAPES TO GRUB—
—SEVEN—
—ATE—
THUMP!
THANX 98
POINK
THANX FOR THANKIN ME. SO YOU ARE AN EAGLE & NOT A RAT. OUR WISH FULFILLED.
—NINE—
+10+
—END—
12/95—SPE

some stuff about comics

by Eric Searleman

Recently, I moved. Nothing special in that. It was from one apartment to another; from one Phoenix residence to another. Having a truck, I did the whole thing myself. This isn't a story about stress, trauma or lost credit cards. This is a story about comic books.

Throwing things away is a big part of moving, as we all know. To start anew we have this compulsion to discard the past. For me, it's part of the fun. A new apartment represents the start of a new life. What suits me best in these new confines? What detritus shall I leave behind? It can add up to a fascinating examination and review of your life.

Last time I moved, I unloaded all my vinyl albums. I had accumulated a ba-zillion records; only about twenty of which I was still listening to. Frankly, I was tired of them all and not looking forward to lugging them across town in the heat of August. Was I ever going to listen to KISS Alive again? How about all those god-awful UFO albums? My vinyl past was suffocating me. What relevance did Uriah Heep have in my life anymore? What relevance did they ever have?

Without a second thought, I pawned them all off at a used record shop. I got a pile of money (cuz some of those records were valuable) but it wasn't the money that I cared about. I had, in a wink, discarded my old life. I was ready to start afresh in my new digs.

Fast forward five years. I had again grown weary of my apartment and made the decision to move. This time as I scanned my possessions I saw boxes and boxes of comics. Ugh! The thought of lugging them across town in the Arizona heat made my head spin. It didn't take long to make my decision: they had to go!

Ok. I got rid of ninety-nine percent of my comics. So what? Any Joe can shit-can a ton of newsprint. The interesting thing is what I decided to keep and what I decided to give away. My choices even surprised me.

First, I sold the most valuable comic I owned. I had bought *Amazing Fantasy* #15 back in 1969. If you didn't know, it was the first appearance of Spider-Man. Like Uriah Heep (the band), the character of Spider-Man was a footnote of my adolescence. For years I watched as *Amazing Fantasy's* pages yellowed and frayed. I felt lucky to finally dump it on some loser.

Next came the bundle of comics that I read once. Those comics simply went out with the trash. When am I gonna re-read concrete? Why would I re-read *Marshal Law*? Why did I ever buy *Vampire Lestat*? These are questions I didn't want to address. Goodbye *Sandman*, so long *Metropol*, get a life *Miracleman*, don't let the door hit you on the way out *Hepcats*.

Then, down to the core: I approached my cache of most prized comics. I wanted to clean house, yet I wondered if I could actually do it. Before I could second guess myself, I started giving comics away like mad.

Eightball, Hate, Milk & Cheese and *Dirty Plotte* went first. All twenty copies of *Real Stuff* disappeared like smoke. My girlfriend snapped up *Narcolepsy Dreams* (for some reason) and people at work requested copies of *No Hope*. Instead of selling early issue of *Love & Rockets*, I freely gave them away to a new Hernandez brothers fan.

I was warned that I would regret my fit of charity, but I knew I wouldn't. I had done this very same thing three times before.

One morning on my way to high school, I picked up a copy of Jack Kirby's *The Demon*. It was a terrible comic and I didn't even want to read it. Right then and there I decided to unload my stash of comics. It was easy then and it was easy now.

There's never been a complete purge of comics, I admit. During my fist catharsis, I kept things like the Peanuts Treasury and an E.C. collection from Nostalgia Press. This time, I decided to keep my hardcover Chester Brown books.

Other, less monumental, comics also made the cut. I found myself keeping a box full of mini-comics. This surprised and delighted me. I never would have guessed that I'd choose these flimsy, xeroxed, hand-stapled booklets over the slick and fanciful books by Fantagraphics, Drawn & Quarterly and Black Eye Productions.

Call me a cockeyed optimist if you must, but it seems obvious that comic books need to take a step backwards before they can take a step forward. Comics (and that includes everything from Image to Kitchen Sink) have somehow lost the connection to their audience. *Palooka-Ville, Eightball* and *Pickle* may be great, but they service their own agenda. *Eightball*, especially, gleefully keeps its readers at arm's length. Mini-comics offer a respite from the pounding genius of Clowes, Ware and Deitch. And for this I'm thankful.

I guess it comes down to a basic question. Do you respect the struggle or the achievement? Chris Ware represents the glorious acme of all comic books. Jennifer Daydreamer, on the other hand, represents the medium's fantastic potential. For this reason, I decided to keep a box of mini-comics on my shelf.

Since history repeats itself, I'm sure in five years I'll be giving away copies of Optic Nerve #20, Silly Daddy #30 and the 12th first issue of Milk & Cheese. I'll also be downsizing other aspects of my life, as well. When my friend moved to Taiwan, he threw out everything except his books. To him, he couldn't live without his massive collection of hardbound books. For me, I've yet

to discover the thing I can't live without. As of now, I can safely say that there's a ton of crap out there and I'm not afraid to flush it down the toilet.

COMICS ARE...

by BEM Productions

Comics can be absolutely anything anyone wants them to be. As R. Crumb duly noted, "it's only lines on paper." And these lines may make letters and words, signs and symbols, and images of any sort and in any combination that can be conceived. The possibilities are literally endless.

The key to understanding comics, as Scott McCloud would have us do, is to locate the position of comics in our society and the function that arises thereof. Comics, as an American form, have their primary history in being a form of entertainment, for the working classes.

The original form of comics was the newspaper strip. Created during the last decade of the 19th century to serve as circulation boosters in the struggle for dominance between rival newspaper syndicates, the newspaper strip gradually grew and evolved into an original American art form. It was, however, at this stage, an art form that was subservient to alien powers: the newspaper syndicates that controlled their existence. In 1935 comics took on a life of their own with the establishment of the magazine format that came to be known as the comic book.

Certainly, the comic book is a commodity from; but it is one that can be considered, at least in theory (although not in practice, as many comic books are nothing more than containers for the hegemonic merchandising of intellectual property from the dominating mediums of movies, radio and television, and, more recently, commercialized popular music, computer games, and even trading cards), as being completely beholden to the comics-work it presents for its economic survival. The comic book is, as art spiegelman succinctly, if somewhat crudely, put it, "The Bastard Offspring of Art and Commerce." (while spiegelman intended this characterization to apply primarily, if not wholly, to the newspaper comic strip, it is not difficult to take issue with this aspect of his definition by holding the position that the newspaper comic strip represents the fetal stage of comics' development and that comics cannot truly be considered an "offspring" of art and commerce until walking on its own in the comic book.) While always possessing a special appeal to children due to the directness of presentation, prior to the introduction and enforcement of the Comics Code Authority in 1955 comic books were no more exclusively the province of the young than television is today. A broad range of conventions and traditions from art and literature were incorporated (some, admittedly, more successfully than others) into the comics form at its inception, initiating a process of assimilation, digestion, and synthesis that has continued unabated up to the present day. It was only after the imposition of the Comics Code - which stated, essentially, that because comic books are especially appealing to children they may contain only material suitable for them - that the comic book receive a definition from without and had its function limited to an ascribed area.

The institution of the Comics Code directly coincided with the ascension of television to the dominant position in the media landscape. Today the comic book is the most marginal form among the commercial mass mediums for the communication of expression that arose during the 20th century and is likely to remain so for as long as it manages to survive. Yet, since roughly 1980 something of a renaissance has taken place in the world of the comic book as its position at the bottom of the food chain has been perceived as making it ripe for exploitation - artistic as well as commercial. To varying degrees, growth has occurred in quality, quantity and variety. 1995, however, was a year in which crisis and consolidation within the infrastructure of the comic book industry provided the revelation that economic growth, driven by an unabashed as well as unrealistic quest for profits, had outstripped the creative growth necessary to sustain it.

At the core of this crisis is the super-hero comic book, a commodity form caught in an inextricable paradox. Its essence being to provide a catharsis for the very alienation its existence is dependent on for survival, that alienation - which contemporary capital-controlled, profit-driven, corporation-dominated culture imposes on all, but especially upon its structurally marginalized and disfranchised members - of the individual from his/her ability to decisively direct the course of his/her own life, or the self from its desire, the super-hero comic book must, of necessity, be complicit in maintaining, if not actually creating and nurturing, the same alienation that it purports to alleviate; for the super-hero comic is primarily a wish-fulfillment fantasy of life lived without this alienation, of an existence fully realized, unadulterated self-empowerment, devoid of the often crippling frustrations that reality and society so cruelly provide. The problem, of course, is that to allow oneself to become dependent on this fantasy diminishes, to a degree directly proportional to the degree of dependency, the possibility of achieving any sort of **actual** self-empowerment. This is a situation which can only be exacerbated, as it has been so greatly of late, by the primary objective of the purveyors of super-hero comic books, which is, obviously, to keep the customer coming back for more - preferably very frequently, for much more. Therein lies the paradox. Must the comic book be limited to the position of servant to alienation? The answer, obviously, is no. However, to the questions: Can a commodity do else but replicate and represent the forces that brought it into being? and is it possible for a commodity form to transcend its origins? the answer must also be no. But a form can be conscious as opposed to ignorant. It can inform rather than delude. And beyond that, a commodity form need not have the drive for profits as its primary motivation, nor have capitalist exploitation at its heart.

The preceding essay originally appeared, in somewhat different form, as the text portion of "Hey! What's the Big Idea?," from **BEM** Publications. For a catalog of BEM Publications, send a self-addressed-stamped-envelope to: BEM Publications, P.O. Box 8619, Pittsburgh, PA 15221-0619

LETTER FROM HICKSVILLE

Minutes of the Hicksville Panelogical Society meeting, 1 March 1996 (Rarebit Fiend Tearooms).

In attendance:	Farmer Dobbs (chairperson)
	Hyram Dinch
	Debs Haversham
	Heather Dishby
	David Hopper
	Harry Dibble
	Hone Deckart (recording minutes)
	Ditmer Hoefilch
	Dolly Harrison
	Danton Hlavovich (in kitchen)
Apologies:	Mrs. Hicks
	Sam Zabel

7:00pm: General hellos and gossip.

7:50pm: Chair calls meeting to order.
Minutes of previous meeting are read and accepted by acclamation (unanimously except for Ditmer, who objects to the inclusion of his being called an illiterate dweeb who can't tell the difference between Pogo and Bone).
Further business begins at 8:00pm.

Chairperson (Farmer Dobbs): Right then, you lot. As we all know, the question of "what are comics" has been a matter of some debate in Hicksville for many years. Last month the society voted to appoint three separate subcommittees to each seek an answer to this vexing question. The time has now come for these subcommittees to report back to the society and hopefully we can all come to a consensus and forget about it. So without further ado, what did you lot come up with, Hyram?
Hyram: Well, Mr. Chair, after -
Chair: What did you call me?
Hyram: Er- Mr. Chair. Seeing as how your the chairperson, that is.
Chair: Oh. Alright. Carry on then.
Hyram: Well, after extensive research and considerable debate, we came up with a definition that pretty much matches Scott McCloud's one in *Understanding Comics*.
David: Groan. Here we go again.
Chair: Which is? The definition, I mean.
Hyram: Well, McCloud puts it like this: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." But the key point is that it's the use of a sequence of pictures as narrative.
David: What about words?
Hyram: Words are usually part of it, but not always. The key thing is the pictures. And not just one picture either, although there are obvious links with narrative painting, for example, or single-panel cartoons, both of which imply a sequential narrative, but only actually show a single image.
Debs: So what about a series of paintings like Hogarth's or a fresco made up of several panels?
Hyram: If they link up to tell a story, then sure, they're comics.
Hone: The Bayeux Tapestry? Medieval broadsheets? Prehistoric wall-paintings?
Hyram: Yes, if they fit the criteria of more than one image intended to tell a story, then they're comics.
Ditmer: What about Egyptian hieroglyphs?
Hyram: Well, no, because by definition, hieroglyphs indicate sounds. They're not pictures, but words. But pictograms or ideograms, on the other hand, such as Chinese writing is descended from, I guess you could call those comics. But that's pretty borderline.
David: Illustrated books? They have a sequence of pictures and they tell a story.
Hyram: We argued about that quite a bit and I have to say we never reached total agreement, since it came down to a judgement call in each case. The key thing was whether the pictures are the main narrative component - or could sustain the basic narrative on their own. We did all agree that the definitive process that is involved in reading comics in that of pictorial narrative, which is often supplemented by words. But when the words take over it becomes a textual narrative, supplemented by illustrations, that's when it's no longer comics.
David: That's stupid. An arbitrary distinction made by -
Chair: Ahem! (silence) Alright then, David, let's hear what your group has come up with.
David: Certainly. Unlike our little iconophilic Scott McCloud groupies here, we decided to look at what a few other people have said about comics. R.C. Harvey and Art Spiegelman both point to word-picture combination as being the definitive element; Spiegelman even uses the term "commix," meaning a comixing of words and pictures.
Debs: I've always wondered where he gets the second 'm' from.
Harry: Maybe it's 'M' for *Maus*.
Ditmer: Or *Marvel*.
Hyram: Or *Meaningless drivel*.
Chair: Order!
David: As I was saying, after careful consideration of what makes comics a unique and exciting medium, we decided that Spiegelman is right, second 'm' notwithstanding. What gives comics their potential to be a great form is the combination of words and pictures, image and text, literature and the visual arts. All the power of both means of expression combined gives it the potential as much as a novel or poem **and** also as much as a painting or photograph. "A picture paints a thousand words," as they say; images can do things words can't, in terms of their immediacy, visceral impact, mood, emotion. Likewise, words can achieve a precision, a complexity, a depth that pictures can only hint at. Purely visual narrative has a tendency toward pantomime or very basic linear storytelling, although the recent development of a greater level of visual literacy among readers is pushing at the limits of what can be done. Textual narrative, on the other hand, is able to be as complex, lateral and playful as thought itself. Look at *Ulysses* or *Tristam Shandy* or even Milan Kundera. If comics are prepared to embrace the potential that the juxtaposition of text and image creates, then they can do anything!
Hyram: Very nice, but is that a definition?
David: Er...well, let me see, our definition...what did we - oh yes, here we are. "Comics are a narrative medium which utilizes both words and pictures in combination; a merging of art and literature."
Hyram: Is that it?
David: That's it. That's the nub of it.
Hyram: That's ridiculous! What about wordless comics, like Jim Woodring's *Frank*?
David: Ah well, we did look into that, and opinions differed. One or two people felt they weren't comics as such, but rather were a kind of visual art - 'sequential narrative art,' or something like that.

Hyram: That's pathetic. Will Eisner's term for *comics* is sequential art! That's what comics are all about!
David: It's no more ridiculous than deciding that something like *Prince Valiant* or *Rupert the Bear* is an illustrated story rather than a comic. I mean, you could equally say that comics are illustrated literature.
Hyram: Why, you -
Chair: Sit down, Hyram, or I'll thump you.
David: Anyway, others felt that at a certain abstract level, comics like *Frank* are still textual, in that they imply a textual narrative.
Hyram: Just like you're implying that you make sense.
David: I'll ignore that. As I was saying, the key thing about comics is the way they combine the forms of visual art and literature. Comics like *Frank* are pictorial analogues for the forms of verbal storytelling. Personally I still feel that the most successful comics are those that contain pictures *and* words - even *Frank* sometimes tends towards simplistic pantomime. Nevertheless. others in the subcommittee disagreed about that, while still agreeing that Franks is as much literature as art.
Heather: So what about a poem that implies pictures? Like say, imagist poetry? If it's a textual analogue of the form of visual depiction, is that a comic?
David: er...some felt that yes, it is. Myself, I'd draw the line at that, just as I did with *Frank*. A poem is literature, a series of drawings are visual art; comics are the combination of both. So an illustrated poem could be seen as a comic, since the juxtaposition of the words and the pictures does create a new thing, a hybrid.
Hyram: You're off your rocker.
David: At least our definition can include single-panel cartoons, and, what's more, it gives cartoonists the freedom to move from picture dominated narrative to text-dominated narrative without this absurd notion that the words are only allowed to supplement the pictures.
Heather: So what does your definition include or exclude?
David: It includes paintings that use words, and books that use pictures. It makes the links with both the visual arts and literature stronger and reduces the need to draw boundaries between them. The point, really, is that comics are the purest form of the hybridization of art and literature and that is their main strength. But because the hybridization is going on all through the arts anyway, it is meaningless to concentrate on trying to erect borders, to fence off comics from prose or comics from painting. A more meaningful definition is one which celebrates the interweaving of the arts.
Hyram: Bloody relativism, that's what it is. Meaningless postmodern claptrap -
Chair: We can argue about it later, Hyram, after the third group have given their report. Dolly?
Dolly: Thanks, Farmer Dobbs. Well, I'm afraid we didn't actually reach a consensus.
David: Uh oh. Here we go.
Dolly: I mean, we tried, but each of had a different idea of what comics are...so in the end we decided to each present our own individual conclusions.
Hyram: This is going to go on all night.
Chair: I agree. I'd like to propose that we listen to Group 3's individual conclusions now and then close tonight's meeting. That'll give us all time to cool off and think about what we've heard so we can debate it more rationally at next month's meeting.
(Motion is carried).
Chair: Alright, then, on with the proceedings. Dolly?
Dolly: Okay. Well, I'll go first. Unlike the other two groups, we decided to go back to the comics themselves, rather than looking at what people have said about them. I considered what I really mean when I talk about "comics." You know, what are they actually like? And I came up with this: "magazines (and sometimes books) made up of a series of pictorial panels, incorporating text through captions, speech and thought balloons and sound effects, in addition to other cartoon conventions (such as idea-lightbulbs, speed lines, etc), designed to tell a story."
Hyram: Er...that's it?
Dolly: That's it.
David: What about the Bayeux Tapestry? Or imagist poems?
Dolly: Well, they're not comics are they? They're just dragged in to give comics a more respectable pedigree.
Heather: What about newspaper strips?
Dolly: I don't call them comics, I call them comic strips.
Heather: So what do you include as comics?
Dolly: You know - *Donald Duck, Famous Funnies, X-Men, 2000AD*. I think we all know what I mean.
Hyram: You're just describing the most obvious kind of comic!
Dolly: No, I guess I'm describing the kind of book or magazine that we call comics. It has panels, speech balloons and captions. It can still be about anything and use any style from Carl Barks to Lorenzo Mattotti, but it's comics, y'know? I think most people know what they mean when they use the word "comics." Comics are a set of conventions, and that's how I identify them.
Chair: Alright, what did everyone else come up with?
Ditmer: Just like Dolly said, it's a question of what you think of when you say "comics." And for me, that means comic books - 7 inches by 10 inches, or whatever it is, with mostly serialized stories and regular characters, full of adventure and humour. They're bright, colorful, fun, vibrant. They're about fantasy.
Heather: Wait a minute. What about European comics? Japanese ones? English weeklies? What about graphic novels? *RAW* magazine? All the thousands of comics that don't fit the format or genres you're talking about?
Ditmer: Well, you can call those comics if you like, and I guess that's fair enough. But for me, 'comics' will always mean four-colour entertainment, American style. That's the heart of comics to me. In fact, if you look at Scott McCloud's definition on page 9 of *Understanding Comics*, he gives some other meanings too: "Superheros in bright, colorful costumes, fighting dastardly villains who want to conquer the world, in violent sensational pulse-pounding action sequences!"
Hyram: But that's a joke! He's satirizing people like you who really think that's the limits of what comics can be!
Ditmer: Yeah, I know he means it as a joke. But what I think is that you can define comics as a genre, as a kind of cultural phenomenon.
Hyram: Woah! Where'd you learn that word, Ditmer? From the Muppets?
Chair: Hyram, I am bloody close to tossing you out on your ear, unless you retract that and shut the hell up.
Hyram: Er...I'm sorry Ditmer, I was a bit out of line, there. Consider it retracted.
Chair: Jesus, you lot are worse than those buggers down in Parliament. Carry on then, Ditmer, and just you ignore Hyram. He can't even spell panelology right.
Ditmer: Thanks. Anyway, superhero comics and the like seem to me to be the main expression of that cultural phenomenon. Heck, it's about the only genre that is unique to comics; everything else has been borrowed from movies or tv or books. I reckon when people think of comics, they're thinking of a style, an idiom. That's what people mean when they say something is 'like a comic,' or 'comic-book violence' or whatever. I just think it's worth acknowledging the idiom at the heart of comics.
David: This is daft.
Debs: No, I think Ditmer's got a point. Comics aren't simply a

form or a set of narrative tools, they're also an idiom. For me, though, the vital part of that idiom is its subversive nature. Even mainstream comics have always been unacceptable to the establishment - to parents, to teachers and intellectuals. They're loud, brash, violent, semi-literate. They grow out of youth culture, which is always essentially subversive, because youth are always at war with adults. And underground comics are obviously subversive and counter-culture and marginal. So I reckon comics aren't art or literature, but part of youth culture and counter-culture. They share more characteristics with those idioms than they do with the Bayeux Tapestry or Frans Masereel.

Hyram: Good grief!

David: Surely, there's a distinction to be made between the form and the content. We've been trying to define the form, the medium.

Dolly: I think our point is that maybe the message **is** the medium. The form has been shaped by it's content and comics certainly carry a lot of historical baggage. I think Scott McCloud is being ingenuous when he does his little trick of tipping the liquid (content) out of the jug (form). Some theorists no longer talk about different artforms as distinct and definable media any more, but as genres, or styles of communication. The boundaries between the forms are constantly shifting anyway, so why not forget about trying to pin down something which is really arbitrary and instead try to look at what's being expressed by these various idioms.

Hyram: But McCloud is trying to say that we've been blinded by those idioms, prevented from seeing the potential of comics.

Debs: Yeah, but look at McCloud's own short-sightedness. He drinks the liquid out of the jug and gags and spits it out like some kind of foul-tasting poison. If you ask me, he's embarrassed by the most commonly recognized content of comics; part of his mission to wean comics away from all that and make them respectable. But comics aren't respectable, and to hell with him if he can't stomach the vitality of ***Spawn*** or the raunchy primitive power of the old Fox crime comics. There's something about all that crudely drawn, semi-literate violence which kids grab on to. They know it's socially unacceptable, and that's what makes it cool. I don't go with all that Gary Groth elitism that seeks to tell young and uneducated people what they should read to raise their consciousness. Kids make out of *Spawn* something that Groth doesn't understand - something very powerful and subversive.

Heather: Hmm. Well, I don't know about that. I mean...*Spawn*? Jeez...

Chair: Well, I think this might be a good moment to call it a night. I'd like to propose one last motion, which is that we send the minutes of tonight's meeting to *Destroy All Comics* for people to read and consider and maybe write in with their own responses. That way we can maybe get a bit of feedback from further afield than Te Araroa before we try to make our minds up next meeting.

(Motion carried unanimously. Meeting closed 9:50pm).

Home Decorating in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

By Marc Weidenbaum

There are comics all over my apartment but only one hangs on the wall. Surveying those walls, white like eggshells and for the most part just as bare, I suppose that I am particular about what I'll display. Or in less effete terms, what I'm willing to look at day in, day out.

A five-foot-tall *Stranger Than Paradise* poster from France commands what my landlord and I call the kitchen and everyone else refers to as a closet. One summer evening after work I carried the dry-mounted monstrosity ("Un Film de Jim Jarmusch") home on the subway from Manhattan to Brooklyn. My fellow subway riders, vagrant and salaried alike, couldn't have looked at me stranger if the stiff board had read "The End Is Nigh" and been sandwiched around my naked body. When I switched coasts the following autumn, I packed the poster with my mattress.

The living room features two more dry-mounts: a *Raw* magazine promotional, illustrated by Dutch comics master Joost Swarte, and a black-on-tan human body marksmanship target produced by the Alco Target Company of Duarte, California. The target is visible through my window, which I suppose should be of some concern to me in this time of personal-armament deregulation. What I find far more worrisome, however -- alarming, even -- is that the same target is visible through the window of an apartment three blocks up my street, where I spied it a few weeks ago while driving home from the supermarket. My target may be retired shortly.

The dining room, which extends from the kitchen much as a dog extends from its tail, is graced by a black-and-white photograph of a bombed-out library. I first saw the image in the Sunday book review supplement of a London newspaper in 1993, and it took a year to track down a copy to the Royal Historical Archives. The photograph is of Holland House Library in October of 1940, no doubt after a German air raid. The floor is carpeted with charred books -- an allusion to municipal book burnings, Nazi, PTA or otherwise -- and the ceiling has collapsed into an X of charred beams, but the walls remain erect, extending into the distance, as do whole shelves of singed volumes along them. Three men stand among the ruins, unfazed by the disaster around them or, apparently, the terror of the night before; each is in a different stage of perusing the library, almost Muybridge time-release style. One, hands buried deep in his overcoat, scans the titles; the second selects a single volume with an index finger; and the third, younger than the other two and the only one minus an overcoat, is already reading deeply. A chair sits empty just off center.

In the past year, friends, relatives and I have stumbled upon the photo in no fewer than four places: the cover of a recent history of World War II; the cover of volume 7 of a lefty political journal titled *Americas Review*; the street window display of a large Manhattan bookstore, blown up three times the size of my *Stranger Than Paradise* poster; and buried deep in, oddly, volume 7 of Building America, an early-'40s scholastic encyclopedia published by the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Education Association.

What appealed to me about the Holland House photo when I first saw it reproduced on cheap newsprint was not so much the compositional spark, as it were, that raised the image from photojournalism to art. Instead, I was deeply touched by this romantic image of knowledge's triumph over violence. So I suppose that I should be pleased to find it widely circulated. Sure I am.

Oh, and then, without pausing at the cork board suspended above my desk or the flea market oddity haloing the toilet, there's this piece of comic art I mentioned.

I suppose it was a long time coming. I have been reading comic books since I was at an age when knowledge's triumph over violence meant preferring to read books in my bedroom over chancing an encounter with the bullies, and other human beings, who populated my suburban cul-de-sac. Along with fear, my parents can be credited with inspiring my bookish retreat

from the world. Family legend tells that they chose the site of our house's construction because it was within walking distance -- .6 miles -- of the local public library: a left off Beech Place onto Briarwood Drive, a hike right down Woodbury Road, and a right again onto Main Street. Place, Drive, Road, Street: Long Island offered such diversity of experience.

Woodbury Road was a thoroughfare, and though I was allowed -- encouraged, in fact -- to walk along its east side to the library, my parents forbade crossing it. A rebel, I was not. I remember when the town built a new road intersecting Woodbury from the east: Washington Carver -- can you guess? -- Avenue. My civic pride at my hometown's racial pluralism was cut brief, for it quickly occurred to me that Mom and Dad might now consider the east side of Woodbury too heavily trafficked. They did not.

Then, one day, someone rented some office space next to an accountant on the west side of Woodbury and built a museum of cartoon art. I kid you not. Across just two lanes of blacktop stood a small red-brick building housing original drawings from comic books and daily newspapers. My parents took me to the museum on occasion, but for the most part I had to imagine its contents from the other side of the street, forced to satiate my image-lust at the library with *New Yorker* compendiums and historian Maurice Horn's *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (which, I recently discovered, neglects Joost Swarte). As if to taunt me, the cartoon museum eventually replaced its generic bronze street number with word-balloon-style signage: a bright white Dairy Queen swirl tilted on its side and outlined in black. Eventually, after a few years of beckoning me into a speed zone, the gallery closed.

The trip from Woodbury Road to my second story apartment in Sacramento is fairly brief, as far as comics are concerned. College. English degree. Shit work. Job offer. Move to California. For the past six and a half years, I have been employed with a music-magazine publisher where, among other things, I edit the comics. We have space for about four or five comics a month, which averages the arrival of one per week. Nothing beats the thrill of opening a package containing comic art, not even interviewing a favorite musician or acquiring the freelance services of a favorite novelist. The ritual surrounding the arrival of comic art is all mine: the NASA-quality Federal Express adhesive; the layers of protective cardboard; the arcane language of the artist's instructions to the printer -- the rare experience of comic-as-art, several times its eventual printed size, before it's been scanned, filtered through computers and reproduced into 350,000 identical copies. (I instigated comics at the magazines in the first place, so the sense of having built something from scratch only adds to my excitement each time a page arrives.)

Recently in Seattle on vacation, I visited the offices of Fantagraphics Books, where I was faced with the reality of big-league comics publishing. Color separations beamed from a half dozen computer screens. Galley copies sat stacked below chairs. Entire issues-worth of comic art lay about the room. "Oh, here's the new Jim Woodring," someone said, motioning toward the top of a sticker-covered file cabinet.

Well, the experience of original comic art -- "original comic art," those three words cemented together in vernacular like "recommended daily allowance" and "sexually transmitted disease" -- can be nowhere so distant from the Fantagraphics experience as in my apartment. I have always wanted to possess such a thing, probably since I lost the raffle for a *Spiderman* page at the cartoon art museum back on Woodbury Road. It has always been a question of what more than when. Several hundred pieces of art pass across my desk each year, editorial illustrations (often assigned to comics artists, rather than to traditional commercial illustrators) and comics proper. But I only bought my first piece less than a year ago, the piece I have since framed and hung in my apartment.

In San Diego for the annual comics convention, I don't often find much of interest. Sure, I swoon over episodes of Walt Kelly's Pogo, of significantly greater dollar value than my car. But financial matters eventually took a back seat in the comic-art search. Originally, I was set on a piece by British artist Dave McKean, the rich photographic collages and the stark pen-and-inks. But the latter, I came to realize, lost something when a single page was orphaned from the context of a lengthy story. And as for the collages -- I should have learned from my work experience. For what looks tremendous on the magazine and comic-book page is a figment of printer's magic. Though fully painted comics, complete with hand lettering, are not unheard of, a single color page may be constructed from as many as a dozen separations. McKean's work was tremendous in person, some four times its printed size, but it was also an awkward origami of vellum, onion skin, instructive overlays and color separations, more puzzle than painting, and certainly not suitable for framing.

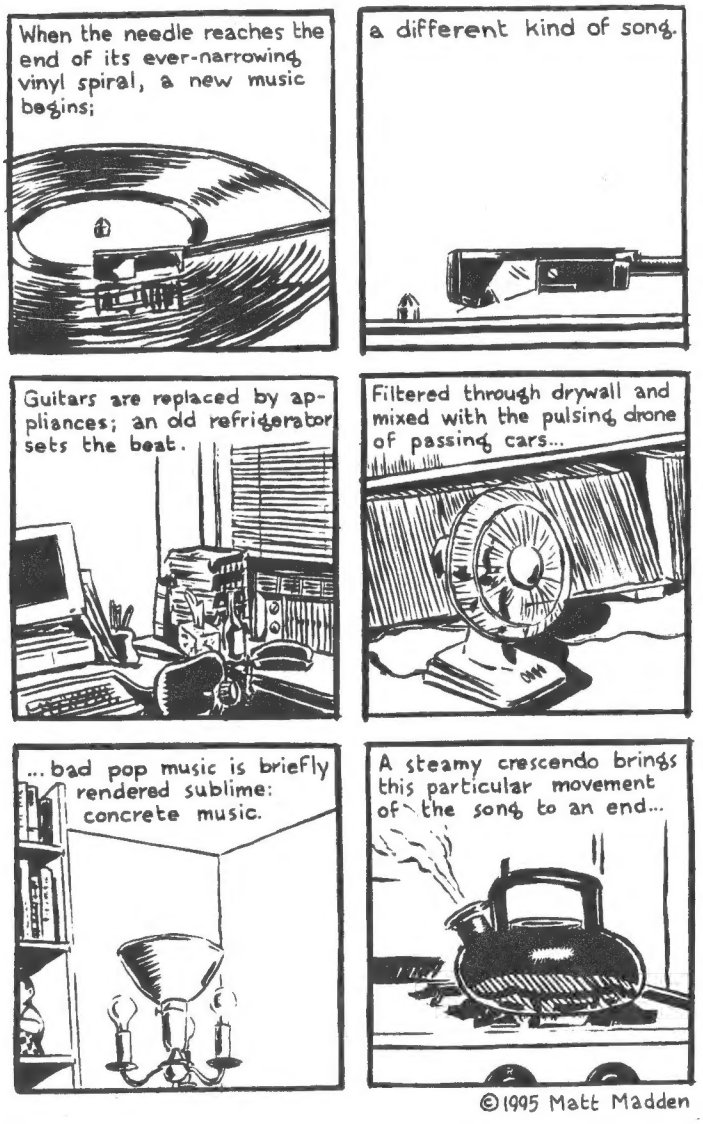
As I write this, I am expecting at work a comic by an artist I greatly admire. He will be providing the piece in two parts: one watercolor, one black line. I am flirting with the idea of purchasing both and framing them separately, but I have not seen the draft yet, so I have no idea whether the piece itself will be of interest to me personally. In any case, computers have rendered such a suggestion meaningless in most of comicdom these days. An overwhelming percentage of comics are colored digitally, as on the tubes in the Fantagraphics office, so there is no actual color work to be displayed in the cartoon museums of the future. At best I could beg a copy of a computer file from a color technician and turn it into a memory-intensive screensaver on my computer. (Hmm?)

Eventually I came to focus my comic-art search on black and whites -- true black and whites, comics meant to be printed in black and white, not a black-and-white piece of art destined for a professional colorist. Ironically, the piece I chose to purchase, the piece which now hangs in my dining room on the wall adjacent to war-torn London, was selected before I ever saw the completed art. A series of faxes arrived one day from a cartoonist named Matt Madden who lives in Austin, Texas, and whose self-published *Terrifying Steamboat Stories* comic I have long enjoyed. Among the faxes was a draft for "House Music," which contained six simple panels. The final art is reproduced here, and it doesn't differ much from the draft, aside from the quality of the line work: A needle retreats from a vinyl LP, instigating a musing about the kind of life-music of which John Cage and Eric Satie wrote, a chamber music that meshes household appliances, street distractions and other ambient noise, orchestrated by the nature of the built environment ("Filtered through drywall," writes Madden). The remainder of the comic art focuses on elements in that environment: a desk, a fan, the book-lined corner of the room, a tea kettle. The peace inherent in Madden's comic is lovely; reading the fax that day reminded me of a "story" he had once drawn in Steamboat Stories about slicing a zucchini.

I OK'd the draft and negotiated with Madden for the purchase assuming the final art met my expectations. Then I sat and waited for the arrival of the comic, feeling like an Alaskan fisherman must in advance of his bride's appearance.

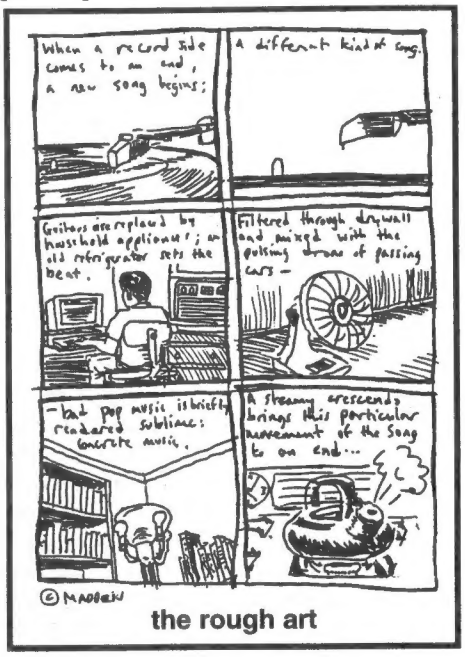
A month or so later Federal Express delivered it. The wording had been slightly altered. The draft's opening ("When a record side comes to an end, a new song begins") had flowered ("When the needle reaches the end of its ever-narrowing vinyl spiral, a new music begins") and other descriptions had been

trimmed ("household appliances" became "appliances"). Several objects had shifted further out of the panels. I have to say that I feel odd complimenting Madden's comic from this vantage, as if I have some vested interest in increasing the work's value. Let it simply be stated that I loved "House Music" upon its arrival. So did much of the staff, and it ran in the next issue of one of our magazines.


When the needle reaches the end of its ever-narrowing vinyl spiral, a new music begins;
a different kind of song.
Guitars are replaced by appliances; an old refrigerator sets the beat.
Filtered through drywall and mixed with the pulsing drone of passing cars...
...bad pop music is briefly rendered sublime: concrete music.
A steamy crescendo brings this particular movement of the song to an end...
©1995 Matt Madden

Three hundred and fifty thousand copies later, I still loved "House Music" and once the art returned from the printer I installed it on my wall. From where I am sitting, my own bookcases are reflected in the corner of its Plexiglas frame. I hadn't looked at the draft in close to a year before I decided to write this essay. I pulled it out of my files at work. Ever the editor, I remembered the text changes. And I was pleased to be reminded that the tea kettle, which faces inward in the final art, once pointed off the page; I believe that Madden's alteration aided the piece's sense of privacy and enclosure.

But the biggest change of all I had never even noticed before. In the original draft, a man sits in front of the computer, typing. His presence thoroughly changes the strip. In the early version we're led to believe that the comic's narration is what the man is typing. In the final version, the narration is freed from such a physical mooring, much as the sounds are freed from their reference points and allowed to mingle into an imaginary musical composition. I haven't discussed this with Madden, but I imagine that he felt that the presence of a body violated the quietude of his piece. One of the ironies of his title is that house music refers to the loud, bass-heavy soundtrack of club life, in contrast to the contemplative peace of home, the peace of being alone. "House Music" rests on my wall now, and it can rest on yours as well, or your fridge for that matter, if you choose to cut it out of this magazine. But don't begrudge my cherishing the original. Part of the marvel of the art is that the ink still reflects, as if it were freshly drawn. White-out is apparent in places, lending texture to the LP. And a light trace of blue-lined drafting remains. The phonograph needle in panel two, for example, was first rendered half an inch above where it now rests. But even in the blue line sketch, there's no trace of the man at the computer, which leaves the house empty for me to enjoy the work.


When a record side comes to an end, a new song begins;
a different kind of song.
Guitars are replaced by household appliances; an old refrigerator sets the beat.
Filtered through drywall and mixed with the pulsing drone of passing cars—
—bad pop music is briefly rendered sublime: concrete music.
A steamy crescendo brings this particular movement of the song to an end...
©MADDEN
the rough art

THE END!

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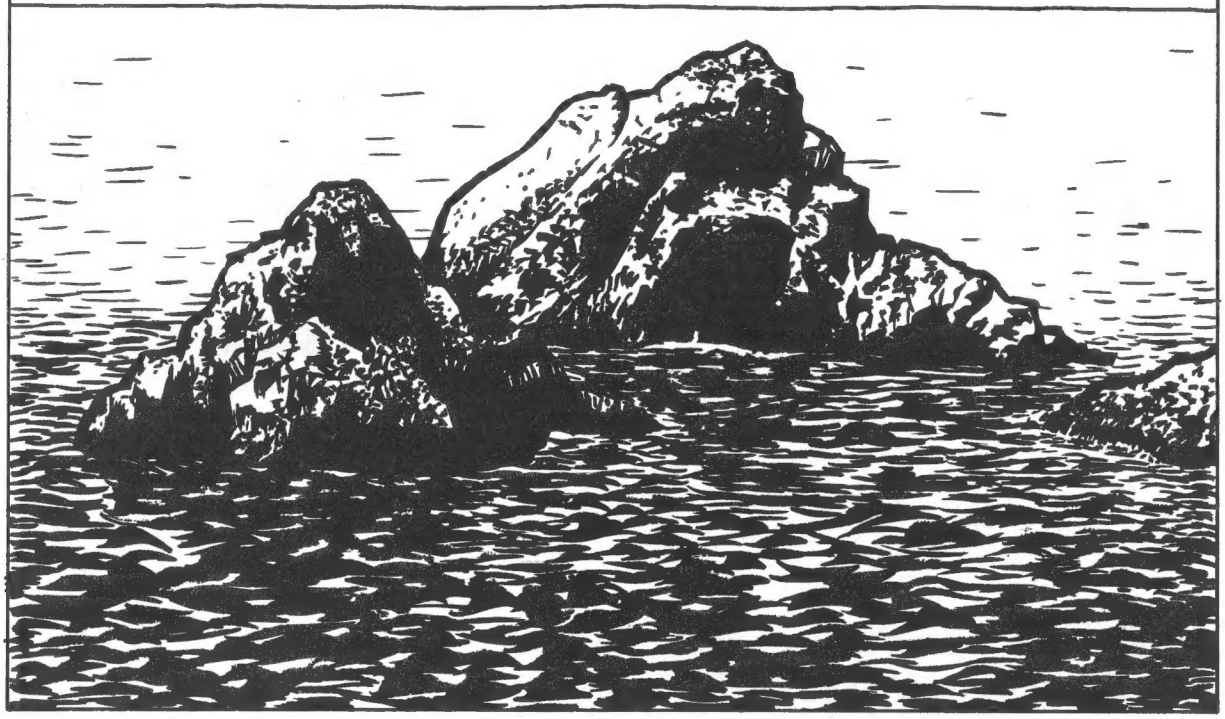
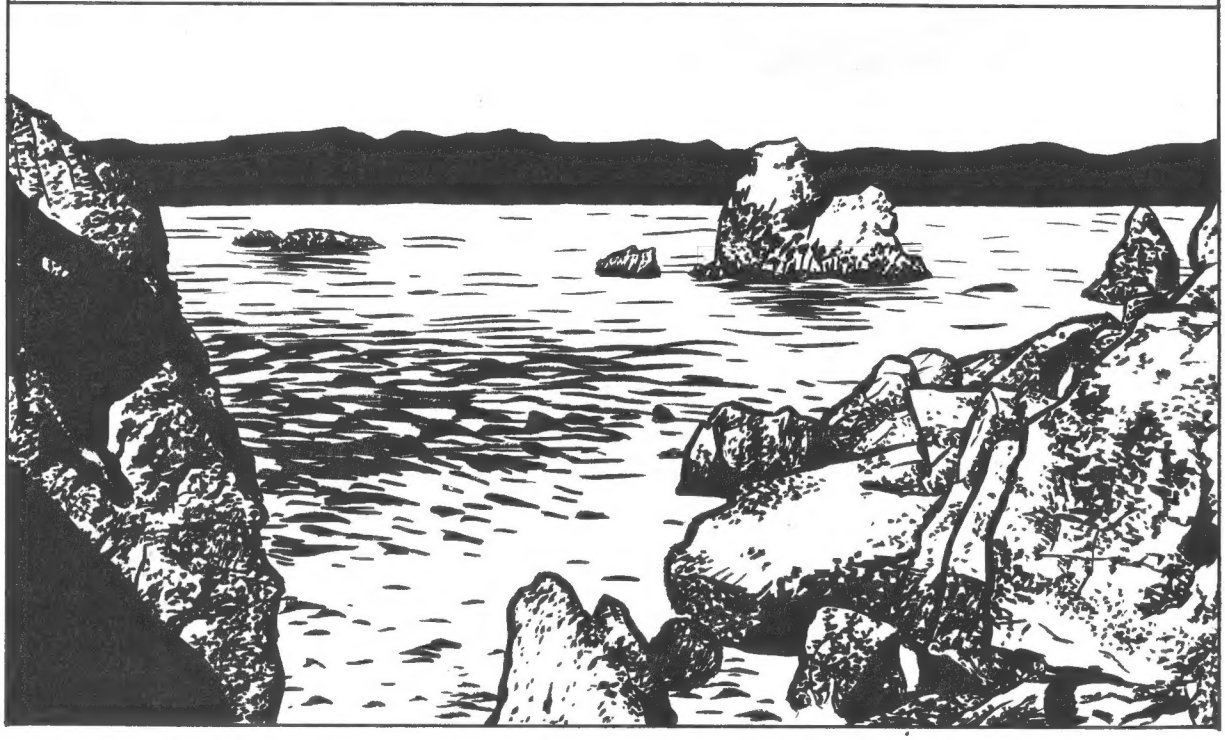


OKAY. THIS ALL STARTED AROUND WHEN I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE. AT THAT TIME, I WAS LIVING OUT IN THOUSAND OAKS, CALIFORNIA, AND ONE OF MY FAVORITE HOBBIES WAS GOING TO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY. I'D BEEN READING A LOT OF BOOKS ABOUT MAGIC, AND SOMEHOW THE IDEA GOT INTO MY HEAD THAT I WANTED TO LEARN HOW TO JUGGLE.



"Many fine dramatic elements in this work...good strong art."
- Will Eisner (Spirit)

"A very good piece of work, interesting ideas, good storytelling, some really fine drawing."
- Jim Woodring (Frank, In The River , Jim)

ROGUE SATELLITE COMICS

by Kevin Atkinson
and
Christopher P Reilly

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